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THE TABOO ISSUE: RULE-BREAKERS ON PADDLING'S EDGE

A L O N E

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WHITEWATER
SOLOS** «

**CALIFORNIA
TO HAWAII** «
ED GILLET BREAKS
HIS 27-YEAR SILENCE

**2014
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Arctic explorers Erik Boomer and Sarah McNair-Landry enjoy the good life on the California coast. See more photos and video at nrs.com/Spring14

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INSIDE: Remarkably, three paddlers in the cave behind this closeout wave emerged smiling and unscathed.

Photo Aaron Schmidt

Sacred and Forbidden

I'd just pointed the bow of my sea kayak at a narrow cave entrance when Sean bellowed "Outside!" A world champion surf kayaker and former beat cop, Sean is typically the calm one in a crisis. He didn't sound calm now.

I didn't bother to look over my shoulder at the massive wave coming to smash me into the picturesque California coastline. I just paddled backwards for all I was worth. The trough drained out from under me and I felt the wave lift my stern. The crest curled around my cockpit, began to push me toward the cliff face, and then, inexplicably, fluttered past and released its grip. I slid down the back of the wave and flashed a grin at the others. Somebody hooted, and it was on.

We took turns paddling through the passage, holding our paddles vertically through the tightest spot, and then reveling for a few surreal moments in the expanse of the cave. Seawater surged and frothed beneath our hulls and dripped from the barnacled walls. It was cool and dark and somehow felt sacred, like standing in a medieval cathedral.

Being there felt like breaking a taboo, in every sense of the word that Capt. James Cook carried home from the South Seas in

1777. Throughout Polynesia and in Fiji, where the word originates, taboo means both sacred and forbidden. For centuries, the concept has been used as a conservation tool ("The Good Tabu," p. 24). In our language, taboo carries a connotation of the occult, a subtle beat of jungle drums pounded into our subconscious by a hundred Hollywood movies. We think of a taboo as a prohibition, often unwritten and always with dire consequences.

In paddling our biggest taboo is paddling alone. In this issue we tell the stories of those who break this covenant in remote whitewater canyons ("Being One," p. 40), and listen as Ed Gillet opens up as never before about his experience in the 2,200-mile abyss separating California from Hawaii ("The Limit," p. 30).

I rarely ever paddle alone, and wouldn't dream of attempting a Class V first descent at night, no matter how righteous the reason ("Last Rights," p. 26). But one of the things I love most about paddling is that it takes us places others may never go. That could be a quiet cypress swamp, a tiny lake three portages deep in the Boundary Waters, or the inside of a cave on the California coast with a set-wave bearing down. Experiencing those sacred and forbidden places is worth breaking the rules now and then. — **Jeff Moag**

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Mike Fiebig wades through a Wyoming meadow on a 100-mile packrafting traverse of the Absaroka Wilderness. Photograph by Jim Harris

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Joel Kowalski celebrates after a solo surf on the Ottawa River's Lorne Rapid. Photo: John Rathwell

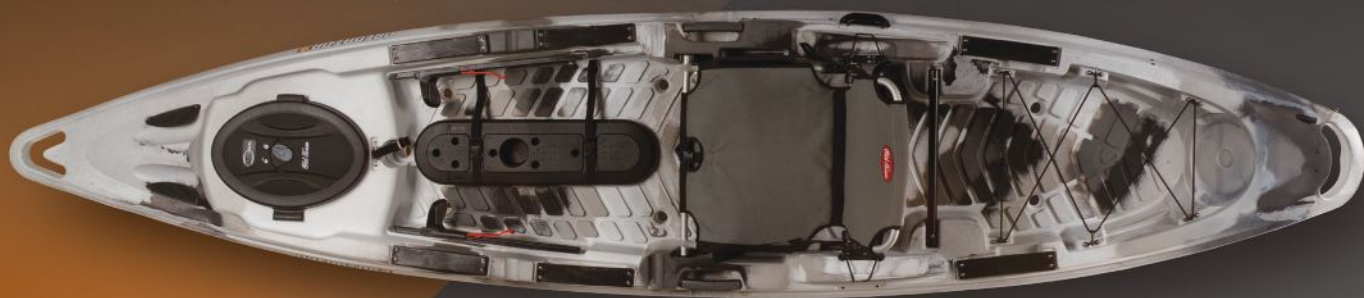
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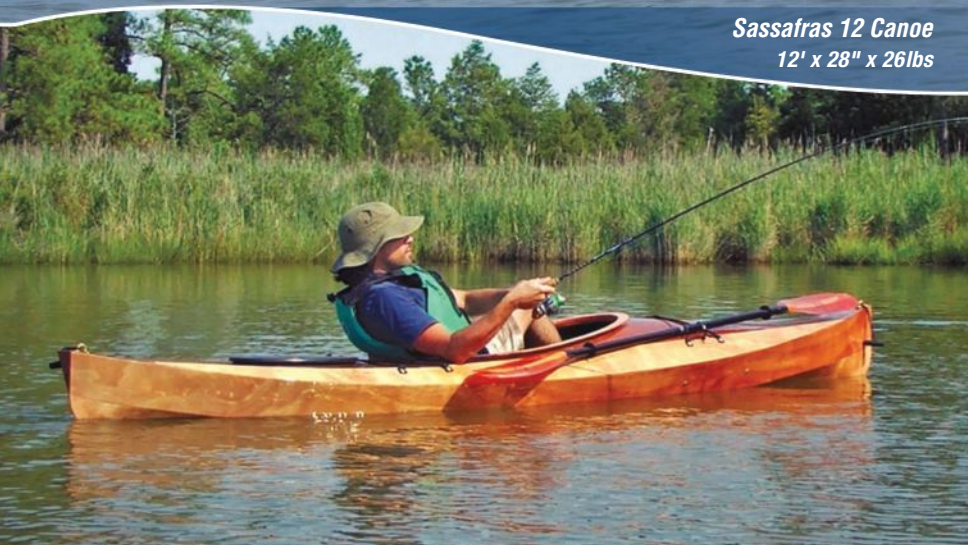


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FRENCH CONNECTION:
The modern trio of filmmaker-paddlers—Ian McCluskey, Kate Ross, and Paul Kuithe, pictured lower right—retraces the French filmmaking expedition of 1938, a 900-mile first descent of the Green and Colorado rivers by kayaks and by a female—Genevieve Joly, pictured top right with Bernard de Colmont and Antoine de Seynes. Photos by Jenn Byrne

VOYAGEURS REMEMBERED

BY ZOE KRASNEY

OUR STORY BEGINS WITH A PHOTOGRAPH. Ian McCluskey, a filmmaker visiting Green River, Wyo., saw the faded image on a plaque marking the 1869 launch site of Maj. John Wesley Powell's pioneer expedition and other historic descents of the Colorado River. In contrast to other portraits of grizzled river-runners, "Here were these two young movie-star handsome guys, and between them a beautiful strawberry-blond woman," McCluskey recalls. "They looked so full of life and I thought, 'I'd like to travel with these guys. I'd like to kayak down this river.'" McCluskey had never been in a kayak.

McCluskey soon learned that the photograph had been made in 1938, and that he had much in common with the three adventurers it depicted. They were inexperienced, restless and, like McCluskey today, part of a new generation of adventure filmmakers.

Earlier that year, young French cinematographer named Bernard de Colmont traveled by steamship to film the jungles of Guatemala. On his

way home to France, he visited the Grand Canyon and found the surging waters of the Colorado irresistible. He quickly enlisted two others to accompany him on an extraordinary journey: Genevieve Joly, a friend's secretary who harbored a secret passion for adventure, and his best friend Antoine de Seynes. Caught up in Bernard's enthusiasm, they agreed to do something no one had ever tried before. All the previous expeditions down the rivers of the American West had used heavy wooden rowboats. Bernard was convinced that they could run the fierce Colorado in 16-foot Berget folding canvas kayaks. First though, he had to teach Genevieve and Antoine how to paddle. Romance flowered along the way. Two weeks before they left for America, Bernard married Genevieve.

Enthralled by the story of Bernard, Genevieve and Antoine, McCluskey gathered an all-volunteer team of paddlers and filmmakers to retrace their voyage. The result is "Les Voyageurs Sans Trace," a short film debuting this spring. Using the trio's excellent 16mm color film footage and modern high-resolution imagery, the story joins McCluskey's own river-running experience with that of the French adventurers. Like Genevieve



and Antoine, McCluskey was a paddling novice with only two months of practice before taking on the Class IV whitewater of the Green and Colorado rivers. His teacher was expert kayaker Paul Kuthe, who together with McCluskey and Kuthe's fiancé Kate Ross, formed a contemporary trio of river explorers for the film.

In the jawbone-crunching rapids, McCluskey had his own date with fear and triumph, just as Antoine had experienced 75 years earlier.

"Being rolled, beaten, smashed and ground, without being able to react, of being held underwater, unable to breathe," Antoine wrote in 1938. "When you finally do emerge, it's just in time to see an enormous wave break over your head and immerse you once again. When it's finally over your breath is gone, your arms and legs battered and your head empty."

The experience is familiar to river-

runners of all generations, as is the feeling of accomplishment at the bottom of a challenging drop. McCluskey experienced that feeling in the big-water rapids of Cataract Canyon. "The churning force of the hole instantly sucked me out of my boat," he says of his first violent swim. "The next day I flipped again. This time I stayed in the cockpit, and tried to roll. By the third attempt I was exhausted, but gave it one last effort, because I was determined not to swim a second time. I ended up rolling. Paul hugged me afterwards and said he was proud. It was a redeeming moment."

The film will be shown in theaters in New York and Paris, but McCluskey also imagines a river screening. "There there are seven or eight folding chairs, a campfire, a couple of coolers of beer and the Green River flowing by, where old and new river-runners can enjoy it"

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ON THE RUN:
Paul Repak, Holly Couch, Ashley Cary, and John Vermilyea paddle New York's Stony Creek during a 24-hour run of the unsanctioned 'Outlaw 90-Miler,' aka the Adirondack Cannonball. Photos by Mike Lynch

LEFT TO RIGHT: A voyageur team and a tandem crew navigate the Cannonball route, neither attempt ending with success; Rodger Dempster and Chas Billingsley are 90-Miler regulars; No pitstops for the C-4 Cannonballers passing a closed gas station near Inlet, N.Y.



CANNONBALL RUNNERS

The Adirondacks' Outlaw 90-Miler declassified

BY MIKE LYNCH

Consisting of large lakes, windy rivers and rugged carries, the 90-mile stretch of water from Old Forge to Saranac Lake is the ultimate Adirondack canoe route.

The route is well known as the first leg of Northern Forest Canoe Trail, and the scene of the Adirondack Canoe Classic "90-Miler," a three-day race that takes place every September.

But it's also the path of a more difficult, less common adventure known as the Adirondack Cannonball.

For those who attempt this feat, there are only two rules: The trip must be completed within 24 hours, and the boat must pass the cedar tree near the boat launch on Lake Flower in Saranac Lake, which also marks the finish of the 90-Miler.

A rogue group of Old Forge paddlers first completed the first Cannonball in 2002, dubbing it the "Outlaw 90-Miler." Only a few boats have finished the route each summer since. Most attempt the journey during weekends closest to the summer solstice, taking advantage of the longest days of the year.

"To me, the Cannonball is the purest form of travel through the Adirondacks," says Syracuse paddler Jon Vermilyea. "You're canoeing the entire route. You're doing it all under your own power and you're doing it continuously."

Those who attempt the Cannonball are often salty

distance racers, veterans of the 70-Mile General Clinton on the Susquehanna River in New York, the Adirondacks' (regular, three-day) 90-Miler, and even the 450-mile Yukon River Quest and Yukon 1,000.

The Cannonball's been run in C-4s, eight-person voyageur canoes, kayaks, tandem canoes and even rowed guideboats. Some do it once just to say they have, but most come back time and again. They have their reasons.

"It's fun. It's spiritual. It's physically demanding. It's a test of your ability to paddle that far," says Chas Billingsley. "I do it for all those reasons. I think it's a great way to celebrate the longest day of the year—just to paddle the highway of the Adirondacks and all that beautiful scenery, to experience it all in one unfolding event."

Attempting the run means pushing off Old Forge Pond dock as early as midnight and arriving in Saranac Lake the following evening. For many, those first few hours of paddling calm lakes under a moon and stars is the highlight of the trip.

"I love paddling at night, in the dark, using channel markers as the reference points of where to go next," says Ashley Cary, Vermilyea's wife. "There's something peaceful about paddling in the dark, hearing only the loons' call and our paddle strokes."


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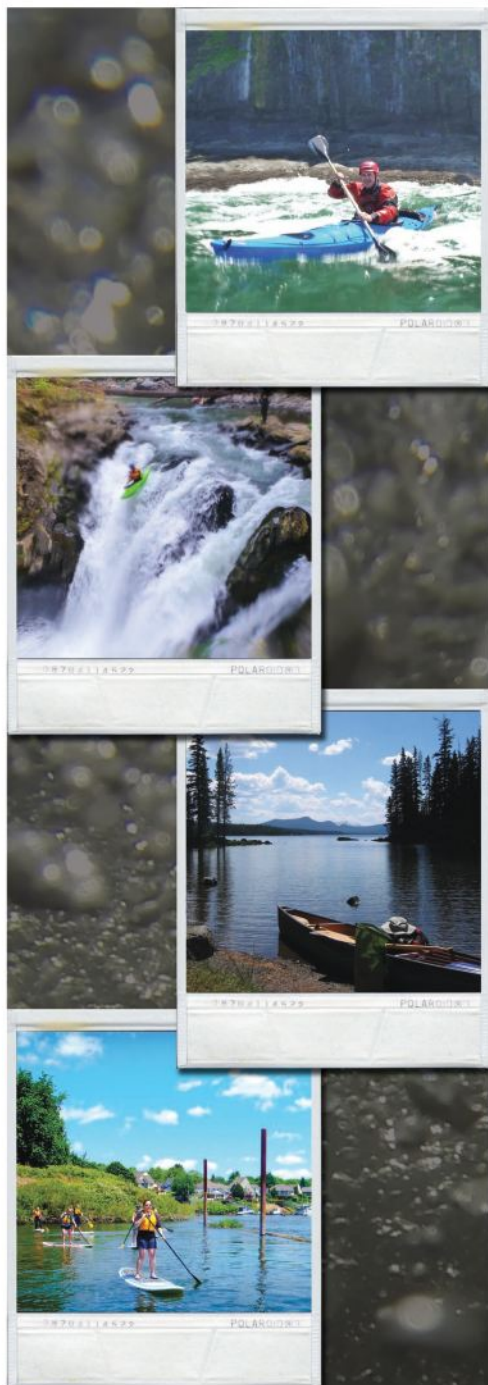


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Photos by Andrew Romanelli



PARADISE ON THE REBOUND: The reef around Leleuvia is regenerating under protection of a traditional Fijian *tabu*.

Mandy West

THE GOOD TABU

BY JEFF MOAG

Colin Philp is an outrigger canoeist with a singular vision: to make a 24-acre speck of Fiji called Leleuvia Island into a world-class resort for paddlers. To realize his vision, he's using a mix of modern and traditional conservation methods, including the ancient Fijian custom of *tabu*. In Fiji and throughout Polynesia, the word means both 'sacred' and 'forbidden.'

On Leleuvia, an island that resembles nothing more than Hollywood's idea of a tropical paradise, Philp hopes to make a temporary *tabu* the foundation of a permanent marine protected area where the coral and sea life will flourish, and the paddling will be superb. When I arrived with my family in January, the beach was lined with kayaks, standup paddleboards, and one-man outriggers. A 12-person double canoe fashioned by lashing together two 40-foot outrigger hulls stood ready at the high-tide line.

As we waited for dinner in the open-air bar listening to a local band playing a mix of Methodist hymns and '70s country in eight-part harmonies, Philp methodically lapped the island in his V-1 outrigger.

The next morning we took out the 12-man canoe with Colin steering and

four of the Leleuvia staff providing the motive power. I flailed along gamely, while my 5-year-old daughter stood in the fast, stable canoe, pointing out the colorful corals and fish scrolling below us. The reef was most impressive within an area marked off by yellow plastic floats stenciled *tabu*.

The island and reef belongs to nearby Bau village, and falls under the chiefly jurisdiction of Ratu Epinisa Seru Cakobau, great-great-grandson of the great warlord who united Fiji in 1871. The *tabu* now in force on the reef surrounding Leleuvia honors Ratu Epinisa's late mother, who died in 2012. Closing an area to fishing is a traditional sign of respect in Fiji, and has been an important stewardship tool for generations. Already the Leleuvia reef is producing bigger and more abundant fish than nearby waters.

There's precedent for such cooperation. "Fiji's strong conservation traditions, coupled with the fact that villages have traditional rights to both coastal waters and adjacent land, have paved the way for integrated conservation efforts," says Dr. Stacy Jupiter, director of the Wildlife Conservation Society's programs in Fiji, which now has more than 170

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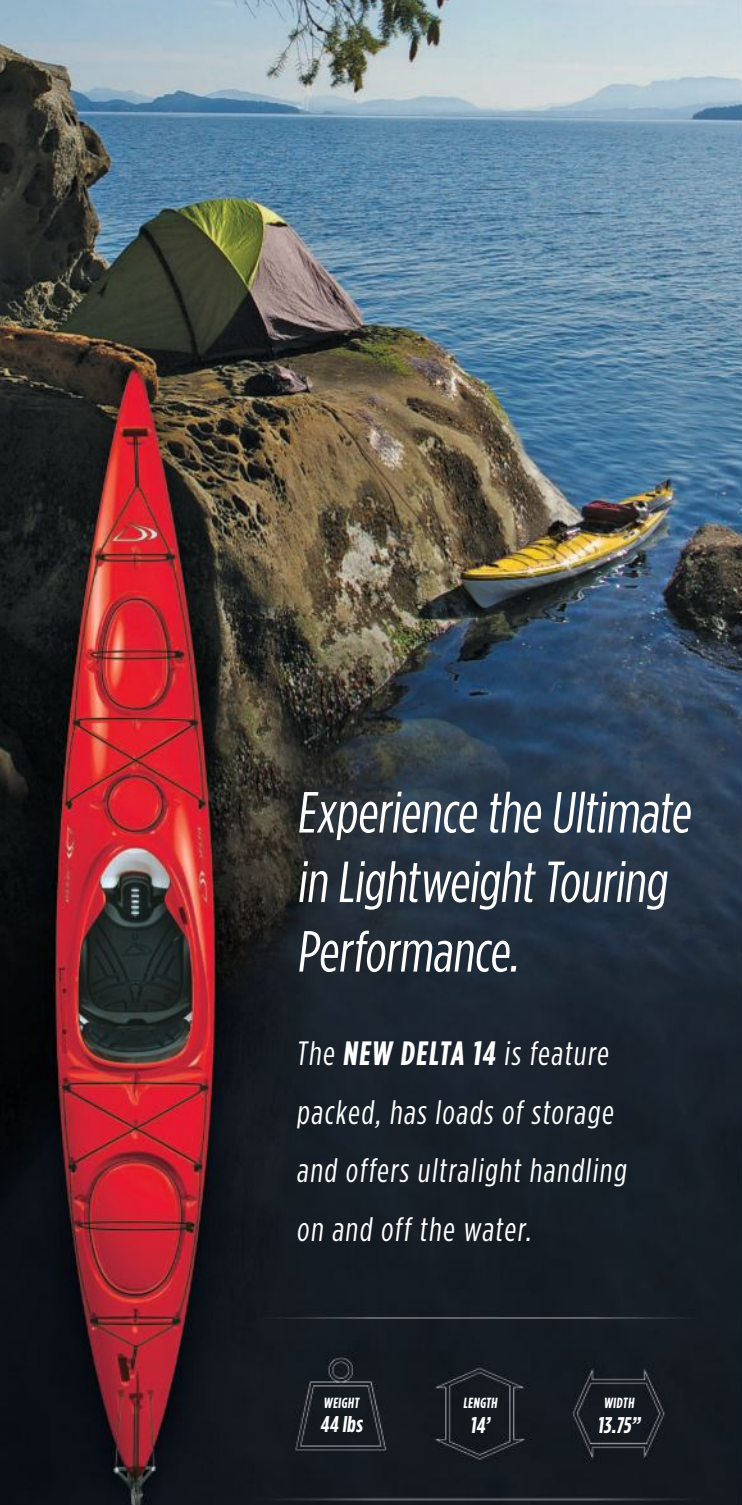
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The Upper Navua Gorge, Fiji. Courtesy Rivers Fiji

marine protected areas.

These initiatives have been successful because they are based on traditional beliefs, and sustain the central way of life in rural Fiji. As Ledua Gagilala, a surfing guide originally from the outer island of Kadavu told me, "In the villages, if you don't fish you don't eat"

These protected areas are also effective because they sometimes compensate the villages for protecting the resource. Take for example the world-famous Beqa shark-dive off the south coast of Fiji's big island, Viti Levu. Divers pay a premium to dive with hundreds of sharks that frequent the lagoon. Each pays a \$20 conservation fee, which goes to the village that has traditional rights to the reef. In exchange, village chiefs have placed a *tabu* on the reef.

Paddlers have been an effective catalyst for conservation in the interior of Viti Levu. The Upper Navua Gorge is a Class III slot canyon shrouded in jungle and fed by scores of waterfalls.

The gorge falls within the traditional jurisdiction of Nabukalevu and Waidiro villages, which established the Upper Navua Conservation Area through a partnership with whitewater rafting outfitter Rivers Fiji. The communities receive a share of the tourism revenue and supply nearly all of the company's whitewater guides. They also have a healthier ecosystem, which provides a sustainable source of traditional medicines and food.

We saw that first-hand on the river, when our boatman Moses Batirua pointed at the steep jungle embankment and began shouting to his cohorts in animated Fijian. I scanned the trees for whatever had caused the excitement. Wild boar? Some sort of Fijian bald eagle?

Moses parked our 14-foot raft in a small eddy and leaped ashore. Two more guides did the same. As the three rafts bobbed precariously on the edge of the current, the trio climbed 20 feet up a near-vertical embankment, where they plucked a few pale red fruits from a tree.

"Kavika," Moses explained between mouthfuls. "The first ripe ones this year."

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BY TODD WELLS

ILLUSTRATION BY ANDRÉ CAETANO

WE REACHED THE ENTRANCE OF BOURQUIN Canyon just as the sun disappeared behind the Coast Mountains. With darkness descending, we scouted hastily from the moss-covered rim of the gorge. In the fading light we could see that the quarter-mile of rapids surging through the canyon was burly, but runnable. This would be our only shot.

If we waited to run the canyon in daylight, workers from AltaGas would almost certainly intercept us, as they had in August 2012. This section, the last un-run mystery of the Iskut River, had become an obsession ever since our first attempt ran into a concrete wall.

That wall is the Forest Kerr Hydroelectric Dam. That August, when Erik Boomer, John Grace, Sarah McNair-Landry and I first scouted the explosive chaos raging through Bourquin Canyon, we decided to portage along the rim. The trail brought us to the dam site, where AltaGas security escorted us from the river. We never got so much as a glance

at Forest Kerr Canyon, which begins below the dam site.

In September 2013, I returned with Louis Geltman, my brother Brendan and a single imperative: stealth. We packed six days worth of food and camping gear into our boats, and planned a 120-mile journey down the Iskut through its confluence with the Stikine and out to the Pacific Ocean. We booked a ferry ride from our takeout in Wrangell, Alaska, and didn't breathe a word of our plans to anyone.

The Iskut was running at a relatively low level of about 8,000 cfs. The moderate flow gave us hope that we'd be able to run the whitewater, but it did nothing to diminish the grandeur of our surroundings as we quietly put on the Iskut. There's good reason that this remote untamed region of northern British Columbia, where the Nass, Skeena and Stikine rivers all originate, is known as the Sacred Headwaters. Caribou and moose graze the vast tundra, wolves and lynx patrol

the steep mountains, bear snatch salmon in the glacial streams—all uninterrupted by any human distraction. Expedition kayakers aren't the only people who feel a deep appreciation and connection to this place. On our drive in, we witnessed the passion of native Tahltan people protesting an open-pit anthracite mine in the heart of the headwaters region.

As we approached the canyon at sunset, the sound of heavy industry reminded us of the changes coming to the Sacred Headwaters. Truck noise broke the silence as semitrailers and concrete mixers roared along the gravel road to our left. Keeping out of sight, we observed a swath of fallen trees that parallels the river to the south. This clear-cut ribbon stood out against the thick old-growth evergreens, ready to host a string of power lines linking the Forest Kerr powerhouse with the Canadian Northwest Transmission Line.

After scouting the canyon, we rushed to gear up as daylight turned to night. We



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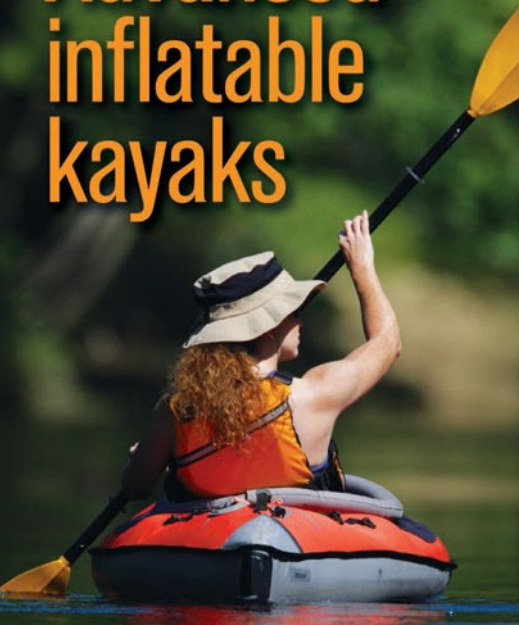
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AQUAPHILE » COVER OF NIGHT

paddled toward the turbulent chaos, ignoring conventional paddling logic that remote first descents *probably* shouldn't be attempted at night. At the start of the gorge we shared a quick moment of serenity. The dream of running Bouquin Canyon was, one way or another, about to unfold in front of us. We exchanged one last set of high fives and peeled out one after another.

Within the first 500 yards, a giant

course around the dam and back toward the river, to the unknown Forest Kerr Canyon.

We woke the next day in a soft bed of moss, packed up and scouted the exploding mystery downstream. Atop the rim of Forest Kerr, I glimpsed the growing dam upstream, already doubled in size since I'd seen it a year ago. This mass of concrete and steel had completely remodeled the landscape, pinching the

We paddled toward the turbulent chaos, ignoring conventional river-running wisdom that remote first descents probably should not be attempted at night.

hydraulic swallowed me. I went deep, to the dark, cold bottom of the river. I popped up in the turmoil of boiling currents just in time to line up for another big ledge. **SMACK**, Upside-down again. I managed to emerge in the canyon's only calm pool. Excited shouts echoed off the tall basalt walls as we prepared for the canyon's final, and most technical, rapid.

Except now, deep in the gorge, visibility was limited to less than 50 feet, making it next to impossible to read and run. I barely made out a small seam 10 feet off the right wall that separated two violent holes. What I couldn't see was the crashing wave below the seam. With just enough speed, I stern-squirted through the mayhem, charged right of a final river-wide hole, and emerged below. The three of us regrouped and caught our breath, congratulating each other in a flood of emotion. And then we remembered the dark forest above, and the imperative of stealth: **Get off the river. Don't get caught.**

We climbed up the river-left basalt wall, hauling our boats behind us. With headlamps on and a faint moonlight illuminating the forest we crept toward the dam site, watching for the next set of headlights rumbling up the road—waiting. We turned off our headlamps, crossed the road, and were back into thick and mossy B.C. forest. With the moon high enough into the night sky, we set our

narrow river even tighter than before. We quickly determined that it would be suicidal to attempt the canyon in kayaks.

A hard two-and-a-half-mile portage brought us to another discouraging scout. Again we shouldered our boats, dashing past a busy construction site and descending a steep gully. Finally we lowered our kayaks to the water, one rope-length at a time.

At the river's edge our masks of fatigue, caked in dirt and sweat, were washed away by the cold glacial waters and replaced with ear-to-ear smiles. Two days of portaging had finally deposited us back on the banks of the Iskut. We soaked in the waterfalls, the yellow aspens and cottonwoods in stark contrast to the massive glaciers on either side of the river. Beams of afternoon light burst through an overcast sky lined with rainbows.

A long, four-day journey to the Pacific Ocean still lay ahead, but we had made it past the most difficult and unknown section of the river. We realized then how fleeting our night run through Bourquin Canyon had been. By next autumn's turning of the leaves, the Forest Kerr dam will be finished, and it will transform the unruly gorge we had just descended into a stagnant reservoir. A first and likely last descent, our shouts of excitement may be the only such echoes this canyon will ever know.

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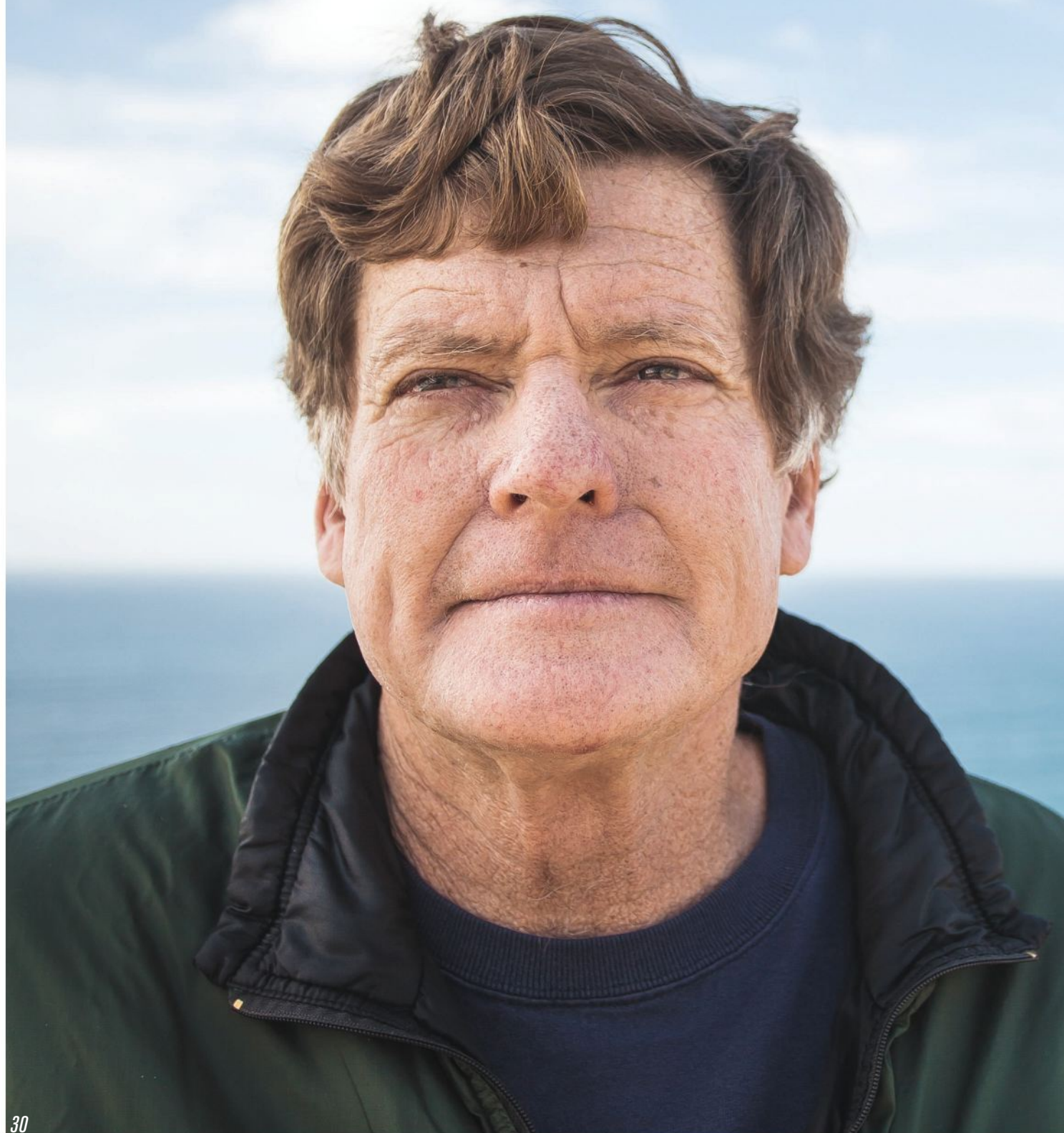
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THE LIMIT

ED GILLET'S SOLO CROSSING FROM CALIFORNIA TO HAWAII REMAINS THE BOLDEST KAYAK VOYAGE EVER SURVIVED, BUT NEVER FULLY TOLD. NOW PADDLING'S MOST ENIGMATIC ICON BREAKS HIS DECADES OF SILENCE.

BY DAVE SHIVELY / PORTRAITS BY ROBERT ZALESKI

The paddles are long gone. Thrown out or raffled off. The kayak sold. The faded pictures and old magazine clippings stuffed into a yellow plastic crate on a garage shelf. The navigation calculator? Who knows.

But there's one item that Ed Gillet has kept all these years in a fireproof safe.

On a cool August evening, exactly 26 years to the day after his unexpected landfall on Maui's Kahului Beach, Gillet finally unlocks his journal and begins to read.

"DAY 30," he reads slowly from the tattered notebook, *"Another fucking calm day on westerly light ... winds,"* he says, pausing to decipher his own cryptic scribbles and then correcting himself: *"Head-winds."*

He's sitting on his back patio, with a wide-open view south and west, out to the Pacific Ocean. His shepherd-lab mix Lucy is curled at his feet. The three of us are getting comfortable, hanging on every word as the sun goes down. It's a scene from centuries past, from some Joseph Conrad novel, the men gathered to hear Marlow tell the tale of his great battle with the sea. Gillet's wife Katie Kampe looks tentatively on from the sliding door, holding a glass of red wine. They don't normally invite media people into their home. They don't talk about this anymore. But she lived through it just as he did. She knows the story, and feels the pain, all too well.

"*Do I feel desperate?*" Gillet continues reading, pausing to give us some context—"and then I give my position"—before continuing: *"Barometer climbing, so maybe I'm past the trough,"* some sort of low pressure. *"I don't know whether to rest, dry out, conserve energy, or paddle out of the hole ... would consider rescue or ride at this point, but no one in the vicinity."*

"*Feel like I've hung myself and it's going to take another 30 days to die.*"

He stares into the journal.

"And then you know what I say after that?" Gillet asks.

"*At least it's warmer.*"

He and Katie erupt. The hardest I've heard him laugh since opening up about his 64-day experience paddling solo from Monterey to Maui in a reinforced stock Necky Tofino tandem kayak. I call it an experience for a reason. I know that a man so careful with his words would cringe at me calling it a kayak trip, or a paddle, a crossing, or even a journey. It is an experience, an entirely subjective thing belonging uniquely to Ed Gillet. And only Ed Gillet.

The closest he'll come to labeling the experience is to call it a "self-imposed selfish quest to do something completely at the edge of human endurance that you may or may not make." Then in the next sentence he points out that one can imagine much more difficult crossings. Gillet himself didn't intend to spend 64 days in his kayak; he planned to ride a 40-

day tradewind express to the islands.

He did not expect to push his body and his mind that far. Sometimes though, as I came to find out that evening, when you cast off, commit and seek out, you find exactly what you're looking for.

What was Ed Gillet hoping to find? What really happened out there?

Johnny Carson got the nuts and bolts in a nine-minute appearance on *The Tonight Show*. Gillet accepted the engagement as NBC offered to fly him, Katie and the 80-pound kayak back from Hawaii. Gillet gave a few slideshows at sea kayaking events, and penned a sensationalized piece for *National Enquirer* (which was subsequently rerun by *Marblehead Magazine*). There were multiple book deals in the works; Paul Theroux was ready to write the foreword.

But then Gillet shut off.

At the first slideshow, when he saw his own photos for the first time, he choked up. The feelings from his experience at the limit were still unbearably fresh. The images put him back there, in the kayak, straddling the edge of his endurance.

Each subsequent question, each interview request, each call, each thought of promoting a book, rubbed that layer of survival trauma raw once again.

"I was just too hostile," Gillet says. "I made sort of a vow to myself that I wouldn't talk about it."

Gillet never spoke of the trip, not even to customers in the San Diego kayak shop he and Katie ran for 14 years.

"One guy went on four kayak trips with Ed and he never told him!" laughs Katie.

"It never came up," Ed shrugs.

The years passed, they sold the shop, Ed went back for a master's in rhetoric and writing, "moved on psychologically" from paddling, and threw himself into teaching. The subject stopped coming up so often. If a student in his high school AP English class asked about a crazy rumor from his past, Gillet would point him or her to the *Tonight Show* segment he'd posted to YouTube, and then continue the lesson from one of his favorite books to teach, *Into the Wild*.

The clip was not enough for me.

In the last year and a half I've written about three men attempting to become the first to retrace Gillet's Hawaii crossing in

**"FEEL LIKE
I'VE HUNG
MYSELF AND
IT'S GOING
TO TAKE
ANOTHER
30 DAYS TO
DIE."**



ON THE TONIGHT SHOW.

Carson: "*That is crazy*"
Gillet: "*Well, Hawaiians got there by canoes.*"

ON THE EDGE:

With scarred, peeling hands, Gillet set the timer of his Nikonos IV to capture this self-portrait on the Maui beach after his 64-day crossing from California.



reinforced versions of stock tandem kayaks. All three returned to California within hours.

After months of delay, Wave Vidmar launched a Kevlar-reinforced Seaward Passat G3 from California's Bodega Bay on Christmas Eve 2012. The Coast Guard rescued him 15 hours later. In June last year, I traveled to the Bay Area to watch Clay Biles and R.W. Hand outfit their 22-foot Necky Nootka-plus tandem kayaks for their attempt.

Biles had become a disciple to the Word of Ed. Though Biles never managed to speak with Gillet directly, he applied every lesson he could glean from Gillet's limited media interaction: He used the same type and brand of boat, and

END TIMES:

Clouds pile up on the windward shore of Maui, 60 miles southwest, and nearly two days of minty Colgate-fueled paddling from landfall.



launched from the same spot in Monterey. He installed the improved canopy Gillet had wished for after the trip, and even stuffed cans of Spam into extra storage spaces as Gillet—jokingly it turns out—had suggested.

Biles and Hand's plan varied from Gillet's in one key area: They did not go alone. After eight hours paddling offshore in lumpy conditions, the pair damaged their boats when they attempted to raft up to adjust a sea anchor and rest. With Biles's boat taking on water and the integrity of Hand's craft in question, Biles accepted a Coast Guard tow in as Hand paddled back to Monterey. The result didn't seem to fit the no-failure profile. These were veterans of the U.S. military's most elite units who had endured years of training engineered to test their physical and emotional limits. They had extensive combat experience. They were two of the hardest, baddest dudes I'd ever met.

It made the question burn: Who is Ed Gillet? How does this understated sea kayaker succeed in an undertaking which defeated the others so quickly and decisively? The trio of failures only amplifies Gillet's achievement—one that has now stood untouched for nearly three decades. No modern paddler has done more with less. No one has gone as far in a production kayak and lived to tell. No one has even gotten past Day One.

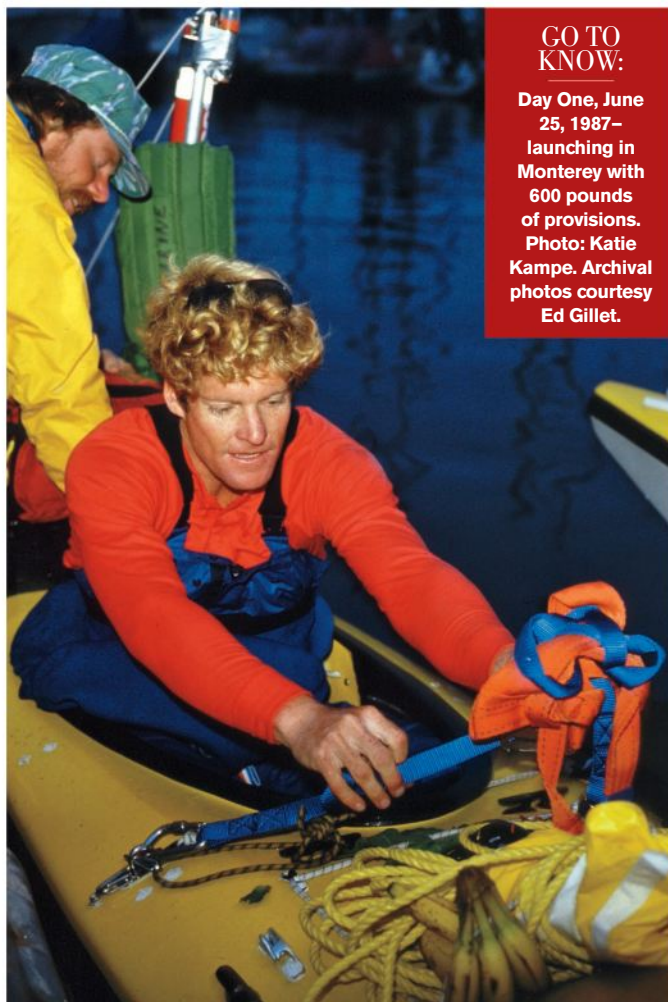
We knew the basics—he ate his toothpaste and landed in Maui—but the story is incomplete. We never know what made Ed Gillet go.

We never know that Ed Gillet, too, turned around.

After days spent clawing his way offshore into 20-foot swells, cold water breaking over the boat, the stress of ships passing in the black of night, sleep compromised by water pouring in through a faulty cockpit cover, Gillet kept going. He paddled to the mantra of "30-130," that is,

30 degrees north latitude and 130 degrees west, where warm tradewinds should replace the westerlies. On the eve of his 12th night at sea, surfing backwards in heavy swell, the nylon line attached to Gillet's sea anchors repeatedly stretched and jerked the boat. One tug was so abrupt it sheered off his 1-inch-thick Lexan rudder blade.

That's when Gillet did what any prudent mariner would do. He turned back to California.



GO TO KNOW:

Day One, June 25, 1987—launching in Monterey with 600 pounds of provisions. Photo: Katie Kampe. Archival photos courtesy Ed Gillet.

bad, I was puking on myself, hanging onto the back of my boat," he says. "It was rough so I was being plunged underwater. It's cold and I'm soaking wet and I put the rudder blade back on, and I thought, 'This is it. All the marbles are in and we'll see what happens.'"

"So I turned around again and paddled out. And I just kept going."

And going.

Gillet fell into a rhythm. With his cockpit lid broken, he covered the kayak's rear keyhole with a Mylar space blanket in a feeble attempt to protect his sleeping confines: a synthetic sleeping bag on plywood raised two inches above the bottom of the hull. It left him no room to roll over. When the water inevitably sloshed above the plank, three or four times each night, Gillet would wake and pump it out.

Once "reasonably rested," Gillet would wake at gray dawn and pump again. He'd take a few anti-inflammatories, rub some ointment on his saltwater sores. Leaving the pontoons (two whitewater raft thwarts) in place, he'd change clothes, find his food for the day, hang his sleeping bag to dry on the stern-mounted radar-reflection tube. Gillet would pull freshwater from his hand-pumped five-gallon tank, and with a propane camp stove wedged between his legs, prepare coffee and freeze-dried food.

When the sun showed on the horizon, Gillet would raise his \$100 plastic sextant to take his first of three daily sun-sights. This was before the days of commercially available

GPS. To find his approximate location, Gillet would calculate lines of position by crunching the spherical trigonometry in a small calculator, take note of the exact time on one of his five watches, and then scribble the numbers in his notebook. He'd stow the navigation gear and deflate the thwarts.

"And then I just paddled," Gillet says. "Sat there and paddled."

An hour later, taking a break, rocking in the waves, he had a long, hard conversation with himself:

"Am I *really* going to go back and fix this boat, spend the money, and then turn around and do this again?" he asked.

No.

He climbed onto the rear deck of his kayak to install his reserve rudder. "It was

Gillet had grown accustomed to solo paddling, and never had a problem "getting completely absorbed" in the movement. "It's like the act of hiking where it consumes my consciousness ... even though I'm paddling a heavy and slow double boat, I was surfing waves, picking up swell, making the boat go, thinking about getting to Hawaii and holding my course and navigating."

And paddling, of course. Eight to 10 hours a day, into the night. Heading toward 30-130.

He'd take his sights, run the trig on his calculator and scribble the readings on his hull.

He passed 30-130, roughly 600 miles offshore.

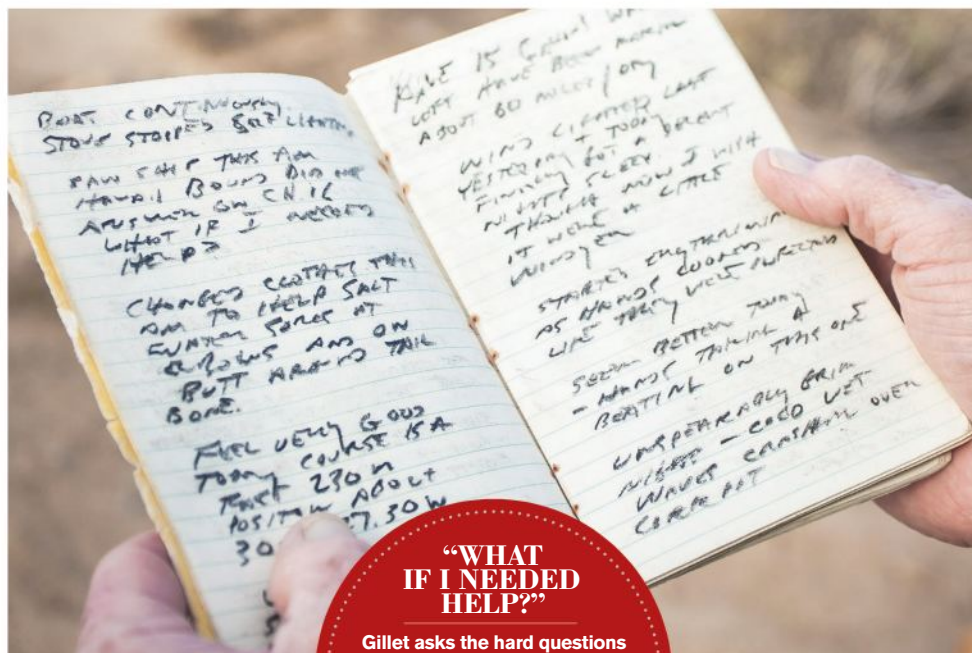
No tradewinds. So he kept paddling.

Growing up in Miami, Gillet's father taught him to sail early. When he turned 16, dad didn't buy him a car. He gave him a 16-foot Luger kit sailboat. "I would just sail south as far as I could, see how far I could get, if I could get to the Keys," Gillet recalls, "spend the night out there and come back in time to be in school on Monday."

Gillet always needed to see how far he could go. The need was also intellectual. He finished college and kept going, moving with his first wife to San Diego where he began a Ph.D. in philosophy. When the marriage went south, so did Gillet. He ran sailboat charters out of Acapulco, and delivered yachts up and down the Pacific coast, and once back from Hawaii. Between trips he worked as a diver, doing salvage work and scrubbing boat hulls to fund his newest obsession, rock climbing.

Gillet became a regular at Yosemite in the late '70s when an innovative generation of climbers was opening new routes on the sheer granite faces of El Capitan and Sentinel Rock.

The best way to grasp how Gillet



"WHAT IF I NEEDED HELP?"

Gillet asks the hard questions as his navigation log becomes a journal of haunting thoughts. Below, Katie pulls the empty refuse from her husband's kayak in Maui. "I'd consumed everything," Gillet says.



processed the seemingly endless void of the Pacific is to understand the mindset of a big-wall climber. He approached the challenge as if he were on a multi-day climb: one direction, and one option to reach the summit. It was "bivouacking on the ocean," only without a tent: Make progress, make camp, do it again.

"There's this other transcendental part of it and climbers recognize this right away. You go climbing thinking, 'I'm going to do this and

do that,' and then the climb takes all of that out of you. You realize you can't do it, and the desire to do the climb comes from a different deeper place: It's not about the climbing, it's about something else."

In 1981, Gillet cleaned the bottom of a sailboat belonging to climbing pioneer Ray Jardine in trade for some big-wall gear. Jardine, who was planning to paddle the Sea of Cortez in one of his 14-foot downriver kayaks, invited Gillet to join the expedition.

**“MAYBE I
SHOULD
WRITE
A WILL
HERE”**

Reading from his journal takes Gillet right back to the moment he wrote the words almost three decades ago.



“We made our rudders in the van driving down,” Gillet remembers, noting his plan to use a “little piece of webbing around my big toes to try and steer.”

Gillet had never been in a kayak.

Though he had logged thousands of miles sailing offshore, Gillet noticed something different that November morning in 1981 when he launched from San Felipe, Mexico and attached his toe straps. There was no noise like that of a typical sailboat, only “the raspy goodbye kiss of the beach on my thin fiberglass hull.” Gillet describes immediately feeling “as comfortable on the water as if I had been born there,” captivated by the silent,

simple, and slender craft, “moving forward as natural as breathing,” as though he could go on paddling forever.

“I half-expected to see him shipwrecked,” Jardine wrote of Gillet’s turbulent maiden launch through the surf. “Finally, about 300 yards out I turned, and with great relief saw Ed coming on strong. I thought: ‘This fellow has potential.’”

“I didn’t know how or where my journey would end and I didn’t care,” Gillet wrote, “as long as I kept moving forward I felt satisfied.”

Gillet and Jardine paddled for three weeks and 680 miles to La Paz.

Gillet was hooked. In 1982, he paddled

solo from Alaska’s Glacier Bay down the Inside Passage to Seattle. That fall, Steve Landick invited Gillet to join him for the Baja California Pacific leg of his 28,000-mile Ultimate Canoe Challenge. Landick had taken a break in Long Beach while his paddling partner Verlen Kruger continued south. None of Gillet’s paddling thus far prepared him for the final 155-mile push he and Landick made to Cabo San Lucas across the crashing surf of Todos Santos. Two and a half days of straight paddling. Sleeping on the water.

“I was always kind of amazed at Ed,” Landick says. “For one thing, I don’t even think



he had a seat in that boat—he was just sitting on a piece of foam, and in order to sleep in that darn thing it was a real act of contortion to get his head down and feet forward to get his head back behind the cockpit. That's one thing about Ed though, I always thought he had a very high tolerance for being uncomfortable."

Gillet could tolerate discomfort, but not idleness. After Baja, with his eyes opened to extended offshore possibilities, he needed more—a journey with an open end. He needed a return to the simpler times, "when hungry hunters with a single purpose moved along a dark coast searching for food, and prehistoric explorers endured months of hardship to satisfy their curiosity."

To satisfy that curiosity, he took out a \$7,000 loan and ended 1983 by flying as far south as he could. He aimed to spend the next six months paddling a 16-foot Seda Viking

from Tierra del Fuego up the entire west coast of South America to the Panama Canal. It took him a year to reach the northern border of Ecuador, where hijackers dragged his kayak back into their town. Though he escaped unscathed, as he began paddling past bales of dope in Colombian waters, he knew the trip was over. He'd already been shot at once and was out of money. He felt physically charged, having paddled 5,000 miles and learning how to handle every conceivable sea kayak challenge, and how to do it alone. What he couldn't handle was the knowledge that he had fallen short, that he hadn't reached his goal.

Ed Gillet needed a new goal.

He'd had more than his fill of cultural immersion. He'd done enough challenging coastal landings. He started looking at extended crossings, with a keen eye to Cocos Island, 340 miles off the Pacific shore of Costa Rica.

"I thought, 'Hell, if you're going to go to Cocos Island, then why not do Hawaii?'" Gillet said. "I'd sailed it. I knew as a sailing trip what was involved. Well, I could do this. I could pull this off."

Katie Kampe understood the draw. She met Ed in 1985 on a beach in Sausalito, Calif., after he returned from South America. A competitive rower who later claimed an open-water national title, Kampe also understood the need to be on the ocean, and wasn't afraid of a risky venture. The couple married in the spring of '87 and opened Southwest Kayaks, a small paddling shop in Point Loma. On June 25 that year, Gillet began the experience he would later call "the most difficult trip I could conceive of surviving." He kept the departure "low-key" to avoid notice of the Coast Guard. Katie paddled alongside in a double kayak to say her goodbye.

"I remember saying, 'Look, if things aren't right, I'll just paddle down the coast and call you from Santa Barbara, and I'll just see what's gonna happen,'" Gillet says, "and in some ways the whole concept of one day at a time applied."

Gillet decided to cut the wire— his tether to the world, to his life, his signal home.

"A night so riotously calm not a breath of air moved to cross the water. The sea mirrors the intense starlight making the sea as deep as the heavens are high. And the phosphorescence so bright even my lightstick is dimmed, easier to steer by the stars than by day."

Gillet is reading again from the journal. He reads at a distance, through the eyes of someone who's graded a lot of writing. He uses choice words to describe his entries: laconic, sketchy, cryptic, quasi-poetic.

But he can still feel the emotion. He can still see his own hands, rubbed raw, scrawling all-capped, slanted letters with the black underwater crayon, shifting uncomfortably from saltwater sores wrapped in wet foul-weather gear.

"It's so intense because it brings it all back," he says. "I'm just ... there."

What started as succinct entries in a navigation log—military time, geographic coordinates—veers closer to a reflection of Gillet's unraveling inner state. Things were not well.

A physician friend had given Gillet a medical kit stocked with Halcion, which he used as a powerful sedative for "four hours of just perfect rest—bliss." For 20 nights he took the medicine. Gillet did not know about the severe side-effects of continuous use. All he felt was the bouts of depression punctuated by huge spikes in anxiety.

Day 58. Gillet compiled in the journal a list of things that were going wrong, most notably unfavorable winds from the east-southeast, threatening to push him north of the islands. More panic attacks. *"Hands very cracked and swollen, probably diet-related, maybe should write a will here."*

Ed looks up from the journal, says, "I'm not gonna make it." He continues:

"Everything I have I leave to my wife Katie, whom I love dearly. I'm sorry for causing you so much pain and grief.

I got two days food, no fish."

Starvation, sleep deprivation, open sores, nerve damage to his legs, uncertainty about living another day, side-effects of the Halcion amplifying his natural fight-or-flight impulses of awareness and alarm.

We're clearly at the crux of the climb.

If he thought he might fall, Gillet had one last lifeline. He was carrying a prototype Argos radar transponder, designed to transmit environmental and location data one-way to a satellite. The 12-pound device was on loan from the Scripps Institute of Oceanography, where scientists had modified it to transmit a crude distress signal. Like a Hollywood time bomb, the device contained two wires. If Gillet cut the first wire, the Argos would transmit a signal meaning "Emergency: Watch Me." If he cut both wires, the transmission would mean "Emergency: Rescue Me."

Day 59. No sleep. Winds from the southeast continued. *"Feel like condemned man. One day food left. Winds southeast. 30 miles day's run and north by five miles."*

Gillet decided to cut the first wire. He

When Gillet was some 450 miles from California, waiting for the trades that never came, the Argos's signal had died. And then it came right back on. Those watching back home figured it for an electronic fluke. But by Day 60, when Gillet was some 20 days overdue, Ed Gillet, Sr. started hitting very real panic buttons. The Pensacola, Fla.-based air traffic controller wrote the commandant of the Coast Guard, even requesting help from President Reagan to launch a search. He called friends in the Navy, who started a rescue projection of Gillet's possible location. The Navy deemed a full-scale search unrealistic based on Gillet's last confirmed position: more than a month prior when the kayaker had communicated by VHF radio with passing naval vessels. Ironically, it was the warships' radar systems

white Colgate toothpaste—*'BUT'*—and I put a big 'but' with like five lines under it—*'noon sight brought good news. The current is stopped and I dropped 10 miles'*—I was clawing my way south to get back online—*'since yesterday, tied kite to keep angle to wind and it's working perfectly.'*

Gillet continued paddling with the wind. He picked up a Hawaiian VHF broadcast. Still no boats, but he began to see more jet trails, closer together.

Day 63. Gillet's sun-sight was interrupted by a blip on the southern horizon. He looked again. The realization hit him: Mauna Kea. The trades piled up clouds on the windward side of the islands' 13,803-foot summit. He was drifting toward the channel between Maui and Molokai. Gillet paddled through the day and night.

"The most intense part was the change in swell pattern," he says. "And once I came in the lee of the island, the wind changed ... the breeze blows from the land over the water and I could smell the land and it was so different from the ocean smell: little bit of car exhaust mixed in with all of the earth. Hawaii's a really verdant place and it just washed over me."

His head-space was changing rapidly as well. "I'd been this sea creature and I'd consumed my entire support system, like traveling through space and I pull up on this island, depleted completely—physically and emotionally."

Sixty-four days after kissing Ed goodbye in Monterey Bay, Katie felt the need to clear her mind. She did what Ed would: headed to sea.

She sculled alone past the jetty. Out to the blue expanse.

"I said, 'Okay, Ed, I've had enough. It's time to get in.'"

She returned to the shop, where Alex Oppedyk was running things for the day.

"Alex comes running down the hall, and says, 'HE'S ALIVE,' and he picks me up, he's this giant Dutch guy, and he's twirling me: 'Aliiiiive!'"

"He's alive?" I ask, and he says, 'ED!' and then the store just filled up with people."

On Day 64—August 27, 1987—Gillet's kayak scrunched the sand, "And that was it. The trip was over."



LANDFALL:

Noon on Maui, \$22 worth of Häagen-Dazs later, Gillet revels as a simple matter of fact. *"It's the same feeling I've had ever since: It's just something I did!"*

crawled to the bow, pulled up the device. The "big deal" moment stood out. His tether to the world, to his life, this signal home was vital.

"Switched argos to emergency. Hope to see ship tomorrow or next day. Feel very weak. Attacks diminished."

The Argos had not been working for six weeks.

"Definite current setting me north. Weakest day so far. Day's run only 15 miles."

that had detuned the Argos's transmission frequency.

Coast Guard officials in Hawaii refused to look for Gillet. "They told me, 'We'll never be able to find him, he's an ant,'" Katie says. The local media in San Diego began to call Katie, requesting interviews. 'Kayaker Lost at Sea' stories began to appear in the press.

Day 61. The tradewinds return. *"Although not strong."*

"Ate last meal this morning,"—the last meal was some tomato powder and some



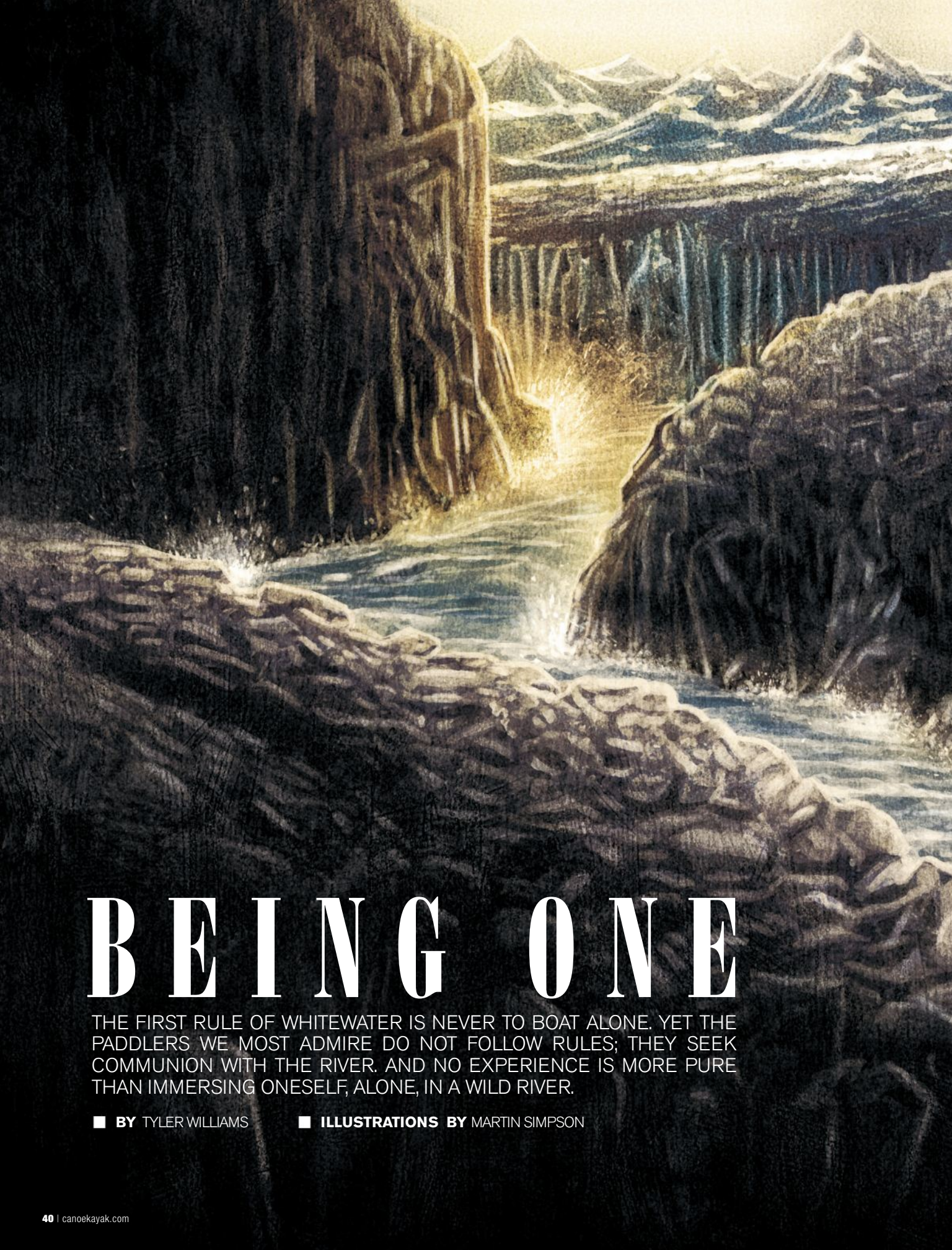
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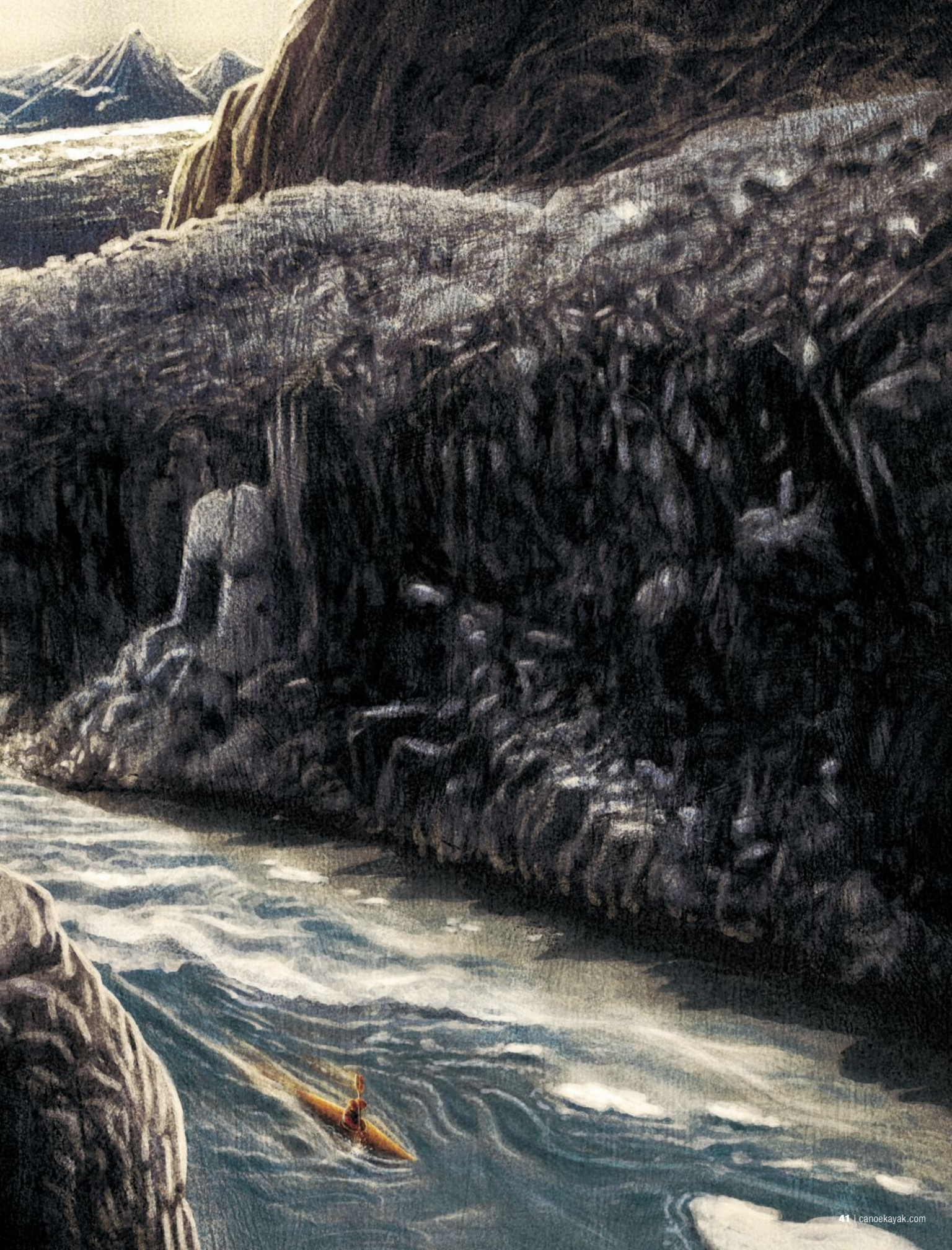


BEING ONE

THE FIRST RULE OF WHITEWATER IS NEVER TO BOAT ALONE. YET THE PADDLERS WE MOST ADMIRE DO NOT FOLLOW RULES; THEY SEEK COMMUNION WITH THE RIVER. AND NO EXPERIENCE IS MORE PURE THAN IMMERSING ONESELF, ALONE, IN A WILD RIVER.

■ BY TYLER WILLIAMS

■ ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARTIN SIMPSON



BLACKADAR

TURNBACK CANYON OF THE ALSEK



Turnback Canyon is a surreal, belly-of-the-earth kind of place. Here in the rugged high country dividing Alaska and British Columbia, the Tweedsmuir Glacier smashes headlong into a perpendicular wall of mountains, and the Alsek River—10,000 to 50,000 cfs of hissing glacial silt—forces its way between them. In the canyon's dark depths a constricted, angry river explodes and boils beneath cold walls of glacial till. Above the rim, a raw wilderness stretches to the horizons and the landscape rumbles ominously under shifting fields of ice.

These were precisely the conditions Dr. Walt Blackadar found as he floated into Turnback Canyon, in a 13-foot-long fiberglass kayak called a Mithril Vector. His soloism was not premeditated. He had tried to rally a group of friends for the trip, but found no takers, ultimately deciding it was best to limit the trip's responsibilities and liabilities to himself alone. At 49, Blackadar was feeling the weight of his own mortality. His father's slow demise to Parkinson's disease had ended two years earlier, and he'd witnessed a spate of recent deaths in Salmon, Idaho, where

he practiced medicine. On August 13, 1971, he wrote in his diary, "My birthday! Looked in the mirror and realized I wasn't getting any younger. After a sleepless night, I decided to paddle the Alsek and to do it this year solo if I can't get a competent boater to go with me."

Twelve days later, Blackadar pointed his bow between the imposing walls of Turnback Canyon. He had chosen an inauspicious time to attempt the first descent. The summer melt had caused the river to swell to 35,000 cfs, and

in a whirlpool, missed the eddy, and was forced to run the rapid. And so the day went. In the canyon's biggest rapid, he broke a thigh brace and rolled on his sixth try, wallowing to shore just above another constriction. He repaired the brace with fiberglass cloth and resin, let it cure for a day, and finished the last two rapids of the gorge.

Blackadar's account of the descent was featured in *Sports Illustrated*, stoking interest in expedition kayaking just as slalom paddling debuted at the 1972 Olympics. The story helped spawn a wave of big-water missions, many of them led by Rob Lesser, who reflects, "Walt was the guy with an imagination for something bigger."

Blackadar's legacy reaches far beyond Turnback. His larger-than-life charisma engaged new participants in the sport, and he pursued adventure films that brought unprecedented notoriety to kayaking. Still, he will always be connected to the Alsek, a place of staggering scale where one man undertook an awesome challenge. His solo descent remains unequalled in the history of big-water paddling.

IN THE CANYON'S BIGGEST RAPID, HE BROKE A THIGH BRACE AND ROLLED ON HIS SIXTH TRY, JUST ABOVE ANOTHER DROP.

the glacier was surging so that house-sized bergs dropped into the river with alarming regularity. Blackadar nearly lost his boat while getting out to scout the first significant rapid, where he twice collided with icebergs. At the second rapid, a chaotic constriction of unearthly boils and surging, trashy holes, Blackadar decided to portage but was instead stern-squirted

Legends Untold

Although the four descents highlighted here are some of the greatest known solo runs, it is hardly a complete list. Doug Ammons' Stikine solo is a landmark in the annals of whitewater. Walter Kirschbaum soloed several first descents in the 1950s and '60s, including Colorado's Gore Canyon. For decades, Switzerland's Felix Lammler paddled alone, completing runs like Corsica's Upper Vecchio and Upper Rizzanese. And then there are the unknowns. When a sponsored team traveled to Nepal for a first descent, they learned from local villagers that "Mr. Russell" had been there before. No doubt, this was Russell Kelly, quietly finding his own singular beat to the rhythm of the river.



COETZEE

MURCHISON FALLS OF THE WHITE NILE

Few paddlers in the history of our sport are as linked by destiny as Hendri Coetzee and the Murchison Falls section of the White Nile. Astride Central Africa's Great Rift Escarpment, this was the last segment of the world's longest river to be run, and for good reason. The rapids feature house-sized holes and collapsing waves that can easily implode a spraydeck and send a paddler to bedrock. Murchison contains some of the most challenging big water in the world, but the whitewater isn't the primary hazard. The stretch contains Africa's densest population of crocodiles and hippos, meaning a potentially fatal wildlife encounter lurks in every pool and eddy. Solid ground offers little respite. River-right is patrolled by gunmen from the notoriously ruthless Lord's Resistance Army.

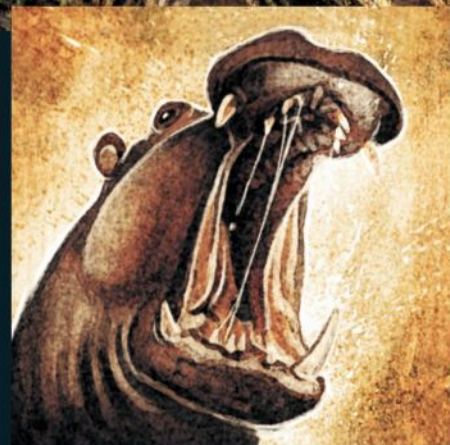
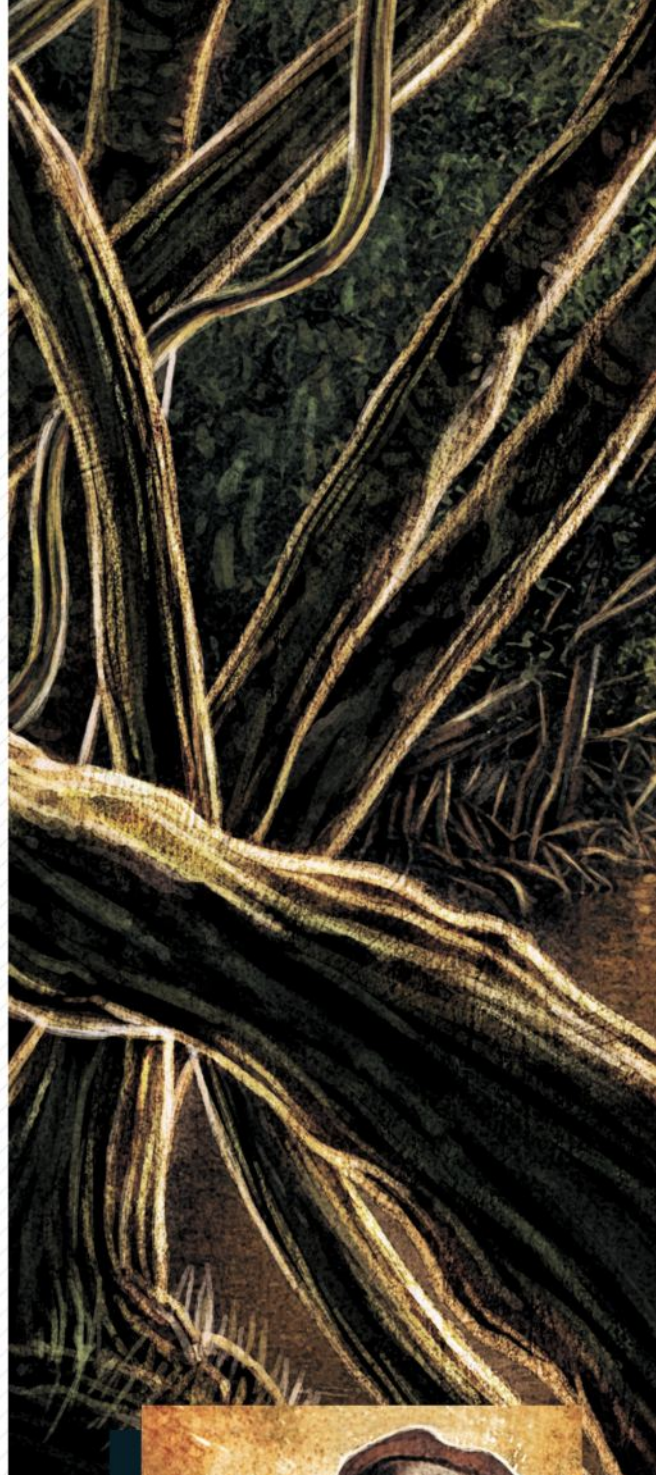
Though eminently inhospitable, this 50-mile stretch of the Nile encapsulates much of wild Africa in stunning beauty, from jungle to savannah, and the rapids offer clean roller-coaster lines if you are in the right spot. Coetzee ran Murchison for the first time during a Nile source-to-sea journey with Pete Meredith, and made two more descents in the following years, always with strong teams. For Coetzee, however, paddling was always an individual sport at its core, and Murchison had a hold on him from the start. "I have dreamed of a solo mission here since the first time I saw the section," Coetzee wrote the day before embarking on his solo attempt. "I kept fantasizing about it ... until one day, it just felt right."

Soon after rounding the first corner

below the put-in bridge, a crocodile charged toward Coetzee. He outflanked the attack and dropped into the first rapid, choosing a line based his recollection of previous runs. His memory failed at a broad horizon-line downstream, so he opted for the jungle, hacking and paddling his way to a side-channel that led back to the main river. More big water followed, but Coetzee hardly mentions it in his notes, instead focusing on the increasing hippo threat as he entered a series of smaller channels. "I had to pass within meters of hippos, but it was the ones I couldn't see that really scared me." A distinctive pattern of islands told him that a tricky rapid was just ahead. As he sifted through his mental notes to recall the best line, another croc surfaced, forcing him to race toward the tricky rapid's tongue at full speed.

That night, Coetzee summarized the spiritual fullness one feels while soloing in a big, wild place. "The colors of the setting sun were caught in massive tropical cloud formations ... the river was dotted with overgrown jungle islands ... a big bull hippo yawned within a stone's throw from me. I was in awe of my surroundings. I felt privileged. I felt connected to all of that."

After a rainy night in his bivy sack,





Coetzee's second day on Murchison became an almost nonstop gauntlet. At one point, he threw his helmet into the river to distract a fast-approaching croc. "From here on," he writes, "I sprinted every flat pool." The last rapid is one of the toughest, but on this run Coetzee was happy to be in the whitewater, and out of the feeding pools. He greased the rapid, portaged around a pod of hippos, and scampered for the takeout. "I sat down at the river to decompress," he writes, "to find some feelings, but nothing came."

A little more than a year after his Murchison solo, in

December 2010, a crocodile killed Coetzee while he was paddling with two other kayakers on the Lukuga River in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It's not ours to decide whether Coetzee's end was a bizarre twist of fate or a predictable result of the way he chose to live, but it nonetheless illustrates the true peril of his solo Murchison run. This was one man testing his own boundaries and challenging his own fears in an uncompromisingly wild place. And for two days in 2009, Hendri Coetzee was one with it.



SALVATO, THE HUMLA KARNALI

Francesco Salvato did not set out to become a Class V soloist. The first big trip he undertook by himself in 1990 was intended to be an easy float down a river that he had scouted from a commercial flight and judged to be Class II. When he arrived at the put-in, however, things seemed different. The river was swift and powerful, and within a few bends it burst into a minefield of hydraulics. This, he soon realized, was not the mild stream he had seen from the plane, but the Class IV-V Tamba Kosi. Such are the hazards of poor maps and Nepali buses.

Salvato finished unscathed and imbued with a new perspective on river running. Despite his high-profile position as an instructor and river guide, the Italian adventurer found himself drawn to solo runs. "When you are by yourself," he relates, "your relationship with the river

becomes much more intense. Nothing disturbs that relationship, and any moment can become so rich." Salvato began to seek such moments on rivers all over the world: the first canyon of Chile's Rio Baker as a friend watched from high above; a whimsical solo on New Mexico's Pueblo, and a surreal moonlight float beneath lifelike saguaro cactus on Arizona's Salt. In Africa, he upped the ante with an unaccompanied overnight on the Zambezi, narrowly escaping a swim below Chibongo Falls and crocodiles on the paddle out.

Salvato's crowning solo mission brought him back to the Himalaya and the Humla Karnali in Nepal's frontier west. Following a two-day trek, paddlers find a river full of long, violent rapids formed by numerous tributaries that increased the water volume dramatically. It has been described as a creek in which

every feature is magnified in scale. Scouts are numerous, and portages are long and laborious. Whitewater heavyweights Pete Knowles, Stuart Wagstaff and Mick Hopkinson made the first descent of the Karnali in 1987. Hopkinson, the legendary pioneer of the Blue Nile, Dudh Kosi and innumerable New Zealand stouts, called it "the most committing river I have ever done." Salvato and an Italian team ran it next, in 1993. Six years later he returned alone.

Running every rapid that he had on his first trip, Salvato moved decisively and quickly down the remote Himalayan gorge. Previous teams had needed 10 days to complete the run; Salvato finished in six. "When you are by yourself, you want to get out of that scary place quickly," he explains. "But when you are finished you want to go back."



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CONTOS, RIO SIRUPA

The nightmare scenario for any river-runner is encountering a rapid that cannot be run in a canyon that has no exit. Although rare, such drops have haunted river explorers since human beings first took boats to current. This is why we eddy-hop, and scout, and, when the canyon walls begin to close in around us, this is why we search desperately for a route of escape.

When descending a river with a team, we can employ strategies to avoid being swept into un-runable rapids. We can stabilize one another's boats at precarious exit points. We can belay a team member who climbs ahead to scout, or even use our ropes to pull a leader back upstream or out of the canyon. If something does go wrong, we can trust the others to do everything possible to save us. When soloing in narrow, unknown canyons, however, we can count on none of those things. It is the ultimate in self-reliance.

This was a recurring truism during Rocky Contos's 10-day first descent of Mexico's

Sirupa River. He probed several slot canyons on the trip, watching pensively from his campsite each night as the river surged with the muddy runoff of evening thunderstorms. Following a long and marginally effective scout from the rim of one gorge, Contos determined that the roar from below came at the end of the narrows, and thus was likely to provide ample portage options. He was wrong. From a foothold ledge he determined the bottom portion of the rapid to be un-runable. His only option was to charge for an eddy just above the terminal section, where he managed a precarious portage. Psychologically exhausted, he dubbed the rapid "Call it Quits," and camped immediately below the canyon. Another chasm loomed.

Before he let himself sleep, Contos committed to a plan of action. "If the water rose again I would abandon the expedition," he wrote. "If the water dropped, I would attempt passage." Morning revealed a slightly lower river, and Contos prepared for yet

another push into a vertically walled gorge.

This cleft also featured a major rapid constricted between high canyon walls. If the river had been running at the previous days' level, a portage would have been unthinkable and the rapid impassable. The river had dropped just enough overnight to allow Contos to climb precariously around the crux. "It seemed to justify my former stipulations for progress," Contos wrote of his decision. After skirting the drop, he continued with a "mix of trepidation and euphoria" to the mouth of the slot.

The 337-mile first descent was one of dozens of solo river explorations Contos completed throughout Mexico during the early 2000s. He would start from the highest possible access point, and continue to the sea. Most of these trips were first descents. Often his soloism was simply a product of not being able to convince others to join him. It's just not that easy to find partners willing to paddle slot canyons at 3,000 cfs.



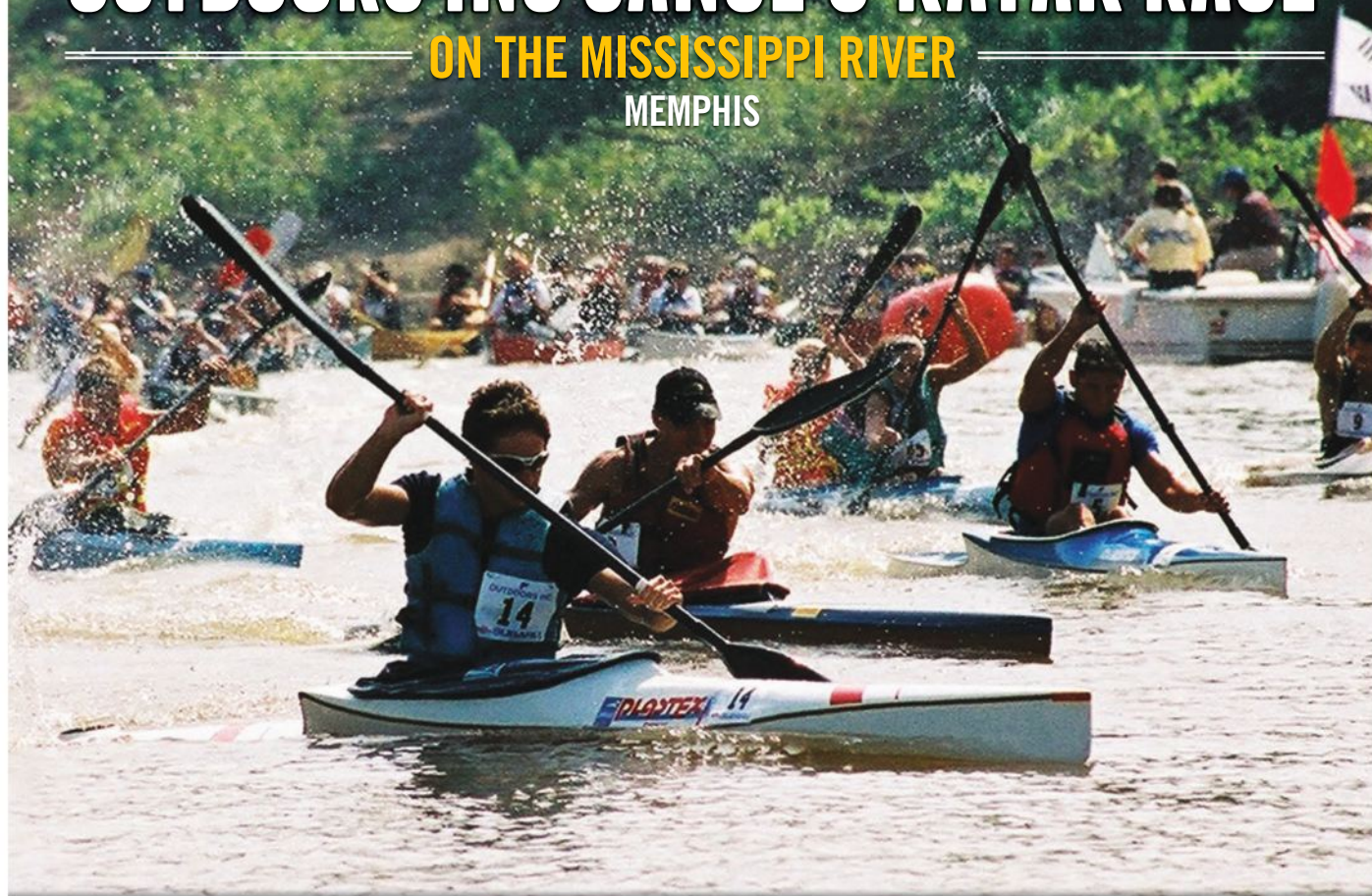
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THE WILDEST CORNER

A PACKRAFTING TRAVERSE OF WYOMING'S ABSAROKA RANGE

BY **FORREST MCCARTHY**

PHOTOS BY **JIM HARRIS**

We follow large wolf tracks up a steep, muddy trail. At our last camp, 3,000 feet below, I'd swept grizzly shit off a patch of flat ground and rolled out my sleeping bag. Now, on the crest of Wyoming's Absaroka Range, we navigate a maze of game trails worn into the alpine tundra over millennia of elk, deer, and mountain sheep migrations.

This is a big, wild place. The Teton and Washakie Wildernesses, combined with adjacent roadless areas including the southwest corner of Yellowstone National Park, comprise a 2.1 million-acre road-free wonderland. Few humans ever penetrate the heart of it.

Fifteen years ago I began exploring the Absaroka wilderness on foot and ski. From the start, the region's many waterways captured my imagination. As Edwin Way Teale wrote, "The river is the original forest highway. It is nature's own Wilderness Road." The trick was how to connect them.

The answer came in the form of packrafts, durable little boats that weigh less than seven pounds and, in the right hands, are capable of descending Class IV whitewater. Suddenly I wasn't confined to rivers or trails; I could combine them. Packrafts changed how I looked at maps and explored wilderness.

I let my imagination run free with a map of the Absaroka, and the result was a 100-mile route through one of the most rugged, remote and inaccessible regions in the Lower 48. Next I recruited an eclectic crew of seasoned adventurers to join me.





Light and Swift: Moe Witschard packrafts the South Fork of the Shoshone River, Wyoming.

Going Up: The author, left, and Mike Fiebig carry their packrafts over the crest of the Absaroka Range to reach the Thorofare Valley.



Moe Witschard has been a river guide for more than 25 years, and dabbles in mountaineering; I'm a professional mountain guide and river-running dilettante. We met four years ago on a winter packrafting descent of Idaho's Middle Fork of the Salmon and discovered we share a love of wilderness and packrafting. Happy, witty and tough, Moe became a stalwart adventure partner. Ski mountaineers Jim Harris and Andrew McLean, and river advocate Mike Fiebig rounded out the team.

Our 35-pound backpacks contained a week's provisions, minimalist camping equipment, and our packrafts. We became amphibious; one day crossing a high mountain pass, and descending an uncharted river the next.

Starting from the sleepy town of Dubois, Wyoming, we spend the first day hiking 13 miles through forests of pine, spruce and fir interspersed with wide-open meadows and escarpments of volcanic

breccia. In early July, 9,600-foot Shoshone Pass is still blanketed in wildflowers. Indian paintbrush, lupine, aster, elephant's head, and shooting stars abound.

We camp that night at Bliss Creek Meadows. The South Fork of the Shoshone River, still little more than a creek, flows silently nearby. Around the campfire we laugh, trade stories and reminisce.

Two years ago Andrew, Jim, and I explored Antarctica together on skis. More recently, Jim and I skied across the hinterlands of Northern Mongolia. Recounting these adventures with friends elicits both laughter and inspiration.

The next morning we inflate our packrafts on put on the South Fork. The creek carries us to the edge of Bliss Creek Meadows, where it drops abruptly into a narrow chasm filled with jagged boulders. On river-left, a well-worn horse trail offers an easy portage. We take it.



Suddenly I wasn't confined to rivers or trails; I could combine them. Packrafts changed how I looked at maps and explored wilderness.

Later the South Fork flows into a committing slot canyon, filled wall-to-wall with swift water. Fortunately, the gorge is clean of wood and we enjoy a surreal float through. A long series of continuous Class III rapids follows, with frequent river-wide logs adding to the excitement.

As we pass the confluences of the East Fork, West Fork, and Needle Creek, the little South Fork grows into the broad-shouldered Shoshone River, full of big waves and hydraulics. We eddy out to scout a nasty Class V drop feeding into a deadly logjam. We portage across loose scree, the footing nearly as treacherous as the rapid itself.

On a gravel bar above the confluence with Fall Creek we hang our wet gear to dry under the setting sun. The next day is a big one: a 5,000-foot climb over the crest of the Absaroka Range and into the fabled Thorofare, arguably the most remote valley in the contiguous 48 states.

In the morning, as we sip a bitter brew of cowboy coffee, Moe shares with me his apprehension regarding the big climb ahead. On rivers, Moe delights in the role of probe, confidently paddling ahead to scout the next drop while I safely wait in an eddy. In the rapids, I watch his every move and follow his line. In the mountains our roles are usually reversed.

This time, Moe chooses a better path through the cliffs and gullies, and reaches a high ridge overlooking the Shoshone and Thorofare valleys well ahead of me. When I finally catch up, Moe flashes an enormous grin. On the crest of the Absaroka Range, the high point of our trip, Moe's



Going Down: Mike Fiebig paddles a rapid on the South Fork of the Shoshone.

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trepidation is a distant memory.

In front of us lies a glacier-carved basin surrounded by the summits of unnamed mountains towering hundreds of feet above. Lingering patches of snow cling to precipices of brown igneous rock. Below, deep green tundra, speckled with wildflowers, gives way to stands of pine and fir.

On the western horizon, cumulous clouds darken the sky. Streaks of lightning and the rumble of thunder soon

descends toward its confluence with the Yellowstone River. The gradient is moderate, the swifts no more challenging than Class II. Herds of elk graze along the river's banks. Mike startles a large bull moose. Bald eagles, perched strategically to scout for cutthroat trout, are indifferent to our presence.

We take out just upriver of Yellowstone National Park, where park policy unjustly bans paddling. Despite public protest, the park refuses to consider allowing this least-impactful means of wilderness travel. (As C&K went to press, a bill to change this policy was pending in Congress.) If paddling were allowed in Yellowstone we could continue to the confluence with the Yellowstone River,

On the divide Two Ocean Creek splits. Roughly half flows east to the Atlantic and the rest west to the Pacific.

appear. Strong winds chase us off the ridge into the valley below.

We follow an old outfitter's trail along steep canyon walls and through dense thickets of alder and dark forest. That evening we pitch camp on a broad alluvial fan alongside Thorofare Creek. To the north the expansive triple summits of the 11,123-foot Trident are lit orange by the setting sun.

The next day we're back in our packrafts on Thorofare Creek, which starts small and gains volume as it

then hike across to the headwaters of the Snake River.

Instead we walk south to Two Ocean Pass, and camp near Parting of the Waters on the Continental Divide. At this spot, North Two Ocean Creek splits. Roughly half the creek flows east for 3,488 miles to the Atlantic Ocean. The rest flows west for 1,353 miles to the Pacific Ocean.

The following morning we continue on foot to the North Buffalo Fork River, which provides a fast and bumpy Class III

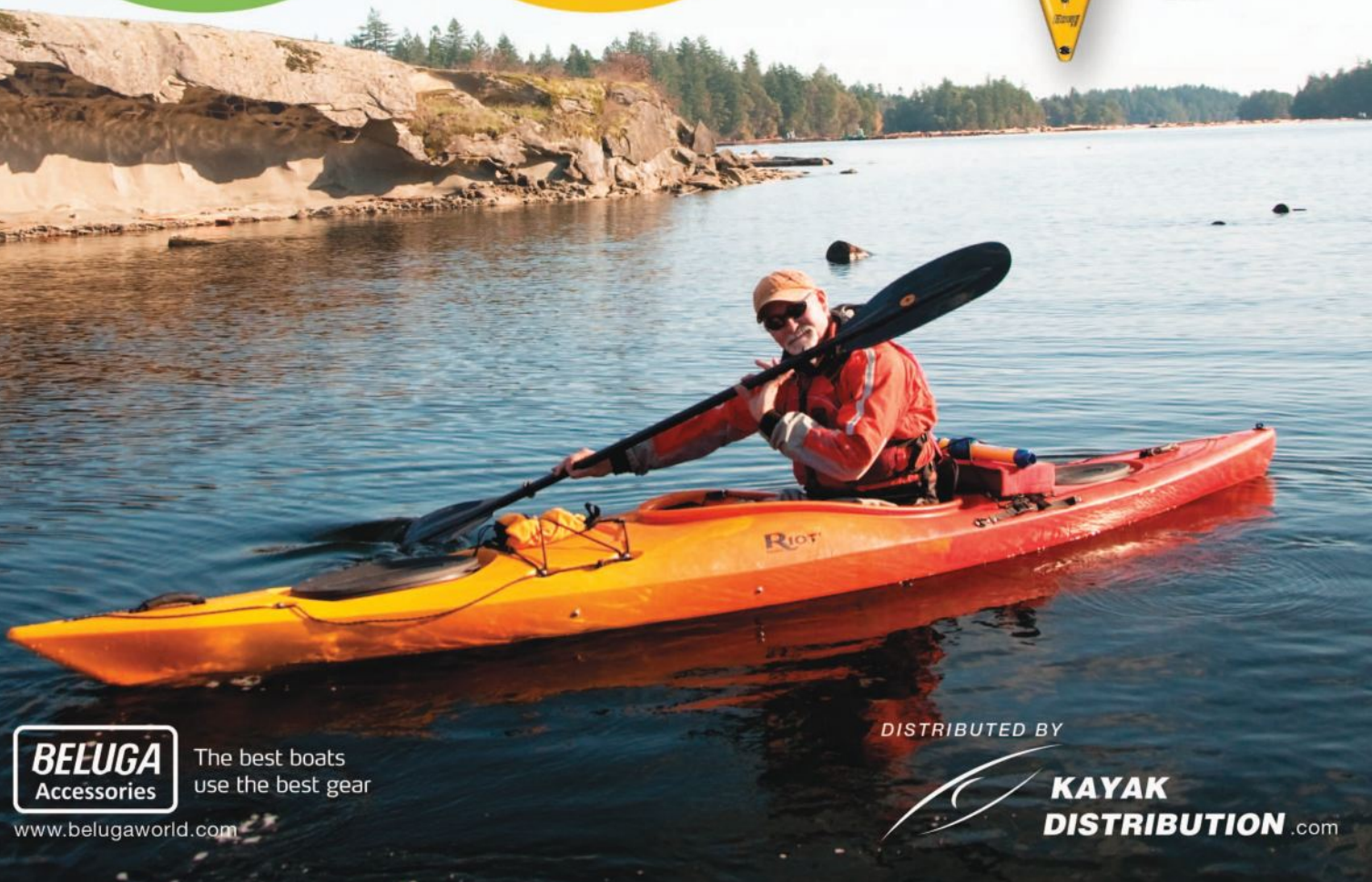
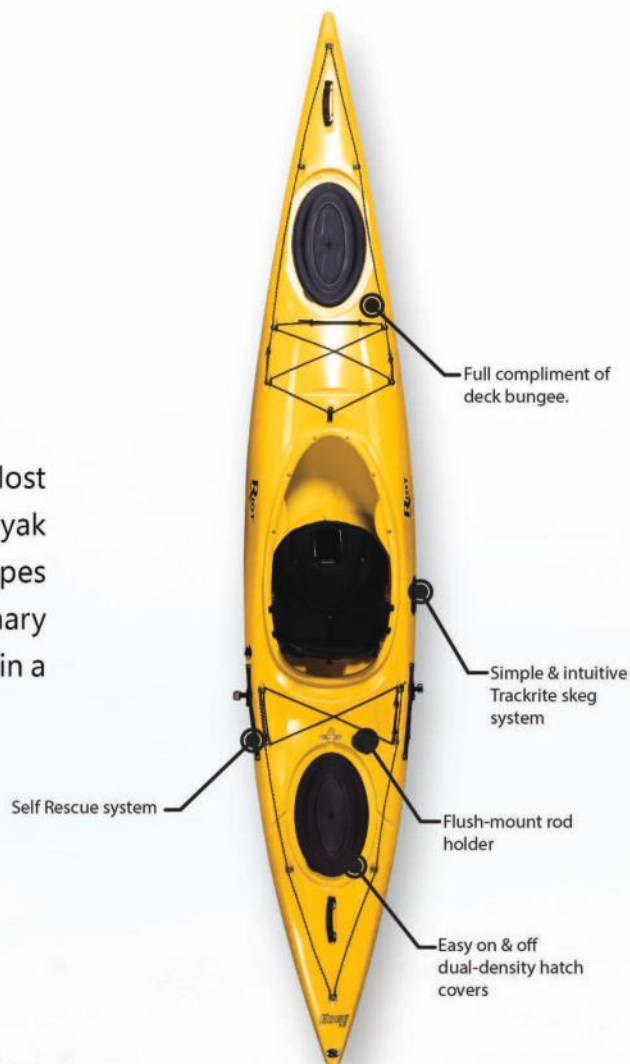


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Back Way: Fiebig approaches the rarely visited southwest corner of Yellowstone National Park.



ride. Five miles below our put-in, we make our fifth and final camp at the confluence of the North and South Buffalo Fork rivers.

Though our cars are waiting at the Turpin Meadows Trailhead only five river miles away, we opt to spend another night out. Our motive is whitewater. In the morning we hike three miles up the South Buffalo Fork River, then descend nearly 400 vertical feet back to camp through a narrow canyon of black volcanic rock. The uppermost section is short stout Class V. We inflate our boats and put in just below.

After a tight turn we come to the first Class IV rapid. The water cascades perilously down a series of long slabs. Slackwater above the drop provides a safe spot to exit our boats and view the entire rapid. We each pick our line and take turns capturing photos and running safety.

Below, the South Fork enters a series of blind corners. Big boulders divide the river into multiple channels. My view is limited. I catch a small eddy, exit my boat and rock-hop along the bank. I'm out in front and the others wait for my signal.

With my paddle I indicate a river-left entry followed by a sharp right to avoid a

Top of the World:

Moe Witschard scoops a drink from Atlantic Creek on the continental divide.



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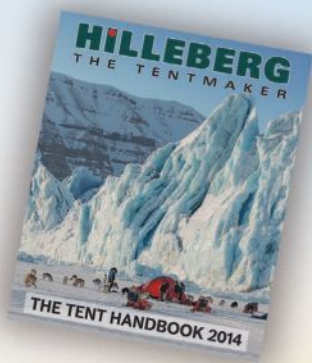
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DESTINATIONS » WYOMING WILD



The next day is a big one: a 5,000-foot climb over the crest of the Absaroka into the fabled Thorofare Valley.

massive boulder. I then point downriver and signal left. It's a complex rapid. I hope I got it right. Moe goes first.

Moe came to packrafting after decades of whitewater kayaking, and it shows. He expertly navigates through the boulders and drops. Intuitively, Moe knows where to ride the eddyline or propel his boat through the next restriction.

One by one the others follow. Soon high-fives and hoots of joy fill the canyon.

Afterwards there's another bend and another break in the horizon line. Pushed between a jumble of rocks and a cliff, the river narrows as it pours over a steep ledge. We all get out to scout.

At the bottom of the most obvious line, the river piles into an undercut ledge. Navigating it would require a heroic left turn. As I consider an alternative entrance, Moe decides to portage.

Last May on the Jarbridge River I attempted a rapid that Moe wisely walked around. The current sucked me into a blind hole. I flipped and bounced hard off a mid-river rock. A week later I learned that I'd chipped a bone in my elbow. I think about that day on the Jarbridge as I sit in my boat at the top of the drop. It is time to focus, however. I pull myself into the moment then push off into the current.

I enter the drop on river-left, opposite the cliff and undercut ledge. I paddle hard to clear several rocks below, but not so hard that I pull myself back into the main current, which would push me against the undercut ledge.

Frothy water at the bottom of the pour-over holds me long enough to dig my paddle deep. The stroke propels me back left, away from calamity. Nailed it.

As I paddle into the flatwater below I find Moe waiting in an eddy with another enormous grin.

"Well done," he tells me.



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L: 13'4"; W: 23.25"; 61 lbs. in roto-molded polyethylene

After 10 minutes and three sweet surfs with P&H's new ocean playboat, one thing was crystal clear: They picked the right name. The Hammer smashes conventional notions of sea kayak design into tiny pieces.

Start with the hull profile. The Hammer has pronounced rocker, a hard chine from tail to upturned nose, and at 13'4" is more than two feet shorter than the average sea kayak. The most radical departure, however, is on the bottom: a flat planing surface borrowed from the newest generation of creekboats. Also on loan from P&H's Pyranha line of whitewater boats: the comfortable Connect-30 outfitting, with ratcheting backband and grippy, Cordura-lined seat and thigh braces. Raised grab-loops and a full-plate footrest round out the performance outfitting.

The Hammer comes well equipped for the ocean, with bulkheads fore and aft, deck lines all around, and an adjustable drop skeg. The boat has four hatches, including day-ports at front center and right rear. There's

space for camping gear and a few day's provisions, though this is no long-distance cruiser. It's a sea boat built for those who like to play rough. Our testers couldn't wait to try it in rock gardens, tidal races and in the surf zone.

The Hammer's maneuverability stood out from the very first stroke. A single sweep will turn it 180 degrees, with or without edging. It tracks like a whitewater boat too, which is to say it weaves left and right with each alternating stroke. The skeg is an easy cure; our testers learned to drop it any time they wanted to cover ground.

Speed is not the Hammer's strong suit, but it is quick when it matters—accelerating to dart through a cave opening, or catch a wave. The Hammer excels in the surf when the flat hull begins to plane. The boat feels 'loose' on a wave and responds readily to paddle inputs, and our testers found it less prone to broach in the surf than more conventional sea kayaks. For ocean-going funhogs of all backgrounds, the Hammer is a revolutionary step in the right direction. — JM



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Photo: Schmidt

NECKY ELIAS

A well-blended plastic performer

(\$1,549, neckykayaks.com)

L: 15'6"; W: 22.25"; 54 lbs. in roto-molded polyethylene

For years, larger Necky desciples have looked longingly at the playful Eliza, designed as a lower-volume coastal cruiser for women and lighter paddlers. Necky teased the big guys even more last year, when it debuted its wood-carbon Eliza, one of the sexiest sea kayak layouts ever to come out of a mold.

Enter the Elias. With crazy-light 'glass and carbon versions due out this spring, we had a chance to test the poly version in our favorite realm, where composite boats would do no good anyway: the maze of swell-riddled caves and rock gardens south of Avila Beach, Calif.

The location fit the hull shape, which blends some British rough-water design elements—aggressive rocker, shorter waterline, dynamic rounded chine—with classic North American tweaks: a big-guy cockpit, seat that won't make your legs numb, and an optional rudder. Skeg options are available in the composite versions.

With good stability on edges allowing for quick turns, this efficient shape also accelerated quickly to catch waves through tight channels. Credit the low deck for that up-tempo efficiency.

That lower deck also means lower knee height for a tighter fit. Though the foam-rubber thigh braces are comfortable, our testers judged them far too flexible in white-knuckle, brace-or-roll moments.

We liked the webbing-adjustable foot braces, and the Quick Seal hatch system is a nice extra. In all, the Elias is more than a playful jump from the rec class to intermediate play. Particularly for paddlers weighing more than 170 pounds, the Elias brings agile versatility to the weekend do-it-all tour-and-play class of kayaks. — DS



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Paddler: Rob Wilson
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Continued from p. 38

Gillet dug up a cleaner shirt, some flip-flops, the \$30 he'd tucked away, and limped to shore wondering where Katie and the greeting party must be. A woman asked to pray with him, a drunk asked where he came from. The desk clerk at the Maui Beach Hotel was even more confused by the crazed and burnt man who raided the hotel sundry shop for ice cream and pre-packaged, triangular-cut sandwiches.

"The guy looked at me like I was a homeless person. I said, 'I just wanna make a phone call.'"

He called the shop, expecting to get Katie but she was out rowing, "So I talked to Alex, he says, 'Fuck, you're alive!' and I thought, 'What? What do you mean I'm alive? Was there any doubt?'"

Gillet then called his father. Hung up, took his sandwiches and relished them in the shade, "as satisfied as I've ever been in my life. I had absolutely no desire to be anywhere else or do anything different—just sitting there completely at peace." Maybe the Argos malfunction wasn't a bad thing. Arriving under the radar made sense. "I'm just thinking, 'Hey, I'm here. This is good.'"

The pay phone at the Maui Beach Hotel started ringing.

And that phone never stopped.

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So why did he take my call?

He vowed in the journal to never promote or even talk about what transpired.

"I felt it was a vision-quest of sorts," Gillet explains, "It was so personal and so powerful that to talk about it would be to weaken it and to take all the power away."

Now, however, "It's far enough away." The anger and resentment has faded. He understands the fascination, at least the part when the "feat" is considered in and of itself, when you add up more than 2,200 miles.

But that feat of endurance was just a succession of small trips and long days. "When you're in that moment," Gillet says, "you survive for that day and get on to the next day." The deeper feelings in that incredible moment on the edge, however, are never going away.

I caught him this summer with time to kill. He was at a screening appointment for Katie, helping her through a long battle with thyroid cancer, now in remission. Okay, he said. He'd talk about it. As I asked how deep the experience cut, he watched the coffee cart go by. It took him straight to the kayak. As he slept in mid-Pacific, knocked out by exhaustion and Halcion, a rogue wave had ripped a deck-bag overboard with his stove, cooking pans, and the last of his powdered coffee. Two weeks later, he spotted a cup floating on the water.

"I guess a cruise ship had gone by and somebody had thrown a Styrofoam cup overboard and it had a dried up,

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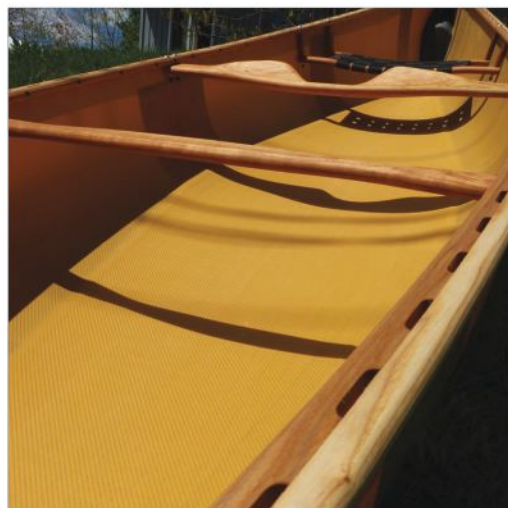
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crusty coffee in it," says Gillet, who snatched the cup and grabbed his backup propane stove inside his cockpit. "I rehydrated it like a heroin addict or something. I drank that down—it was so good."

These are the flashbacks he doesn't mind revisiting—ones that let him appreciate the small things. But though he had no long-term physical injuries or scars, the experience remains "a huge part of my inner consciousness."

He learned his limit. He can only explain the parameters of that edge with a grainy video clip. Gillet recognizes it in the eyes of Andrew McAuley, another driven adventurer who brought a mountaineering mindset to his 2007 quest to paddle a stock kayak from Australia to New Zealand. His tragic disappearance in the Tasman Sea—a day shy from completing the trip after a month of punishing paddling—was well documented, as rescuers recovered his kayak with some of his camera footage intact. It captures McAuley's tortured inner monologue in a

way that Gillet's journal never could.

"You can see it," Gillet says. "He has the camera on him and he films himself and says, 'Fuck this, I'll never do this again,' then the next breath, he says, 'Yeah, this is a great adventure' and he's looking around, not even aware of the camera, and he's got this haunted look in his eyes and I just totally see that: being of two minds."

The constant tug between fight and flight, the fine line between misery and exhilaration: Gillet can only describe the experience as being perpetually stuck in this intense plane of "double consciousness."

"I felt really stupid the whole time, selfish trying to pull this off," he says. "But knowing at the same time that this is also an incredible moment. Like you're in this place no one else had been! You're in the middle of the ocean in a kayak! It's like that: Incredible! This is so stupid ... And even with that feeling in that moment, at the same time: Okay, I have to keep going, I can't turn around."

That act of reckoning, of going when "every fiber in your body says turn around," has a definite appeal. Gillet gets it, he understands the archetypal quest: "People want to go and prove themselves and there's just no way to do that in ordinary life." He can see why men like Vidmar, Biles and Hand are drawn to the concept of "the crossing" as this ultimate test.

Gillet also can see what perhaps the others cannot: This is not an ordinary A-to-B expedition that one can control with the correct packing list, itinerary, the proper gameplan for calories-per-day.

Sure, Gillet has plenty of advice in that regard. Were he to do it again, he'd swim to clean his hull, he'd take a dodger canopy, he'd stuff in that extra pack of bagels left on the Monterey docks. Maybe he'd take a few more books on tape.

But there was, literally, no map for this trip. "You don't need a chart to hit a point," says Gillet, who would simply crunch numbers, scrawling the coordinates like a

Continued on p. 68

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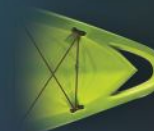
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Continued from p. 66

prisoner right on the side of the boat, reflecting in the journal, “*same ocean, different numbers.*”

“I was in the same place, almost like nothing changes—every place on the ocean was really unique—but the experience was the same, like sitting in the center of this universe and paddling this boat, but there was no sense of crossing an ocean, or a destination. My horizon had shrunk to just keep paddling.”

This is not a trip tailored to advice. There are too many variables. Gillet guesses that if he attempted the crossing the same way 10 times, he’d die on five of the attempts.

It’s a game of committing to deal with one’s body, the ocean, the weather. Adapting and surviving. “Space and time change completely and you’re in this moment and when the sea lets you go, that’s when you get up.”

What he’ll never quite get though, is the admiration. A magazine story that claims it as the “boldest kayak voyage ever survived”? Sure, “no gringo has done it,” he quips, taking a long view back at the Pacific’s great ocean voyages, quests from a different time when individuals would answer a calling for the sake of adventure alone. Expeditions without live-Tweets. Journeys without endings.

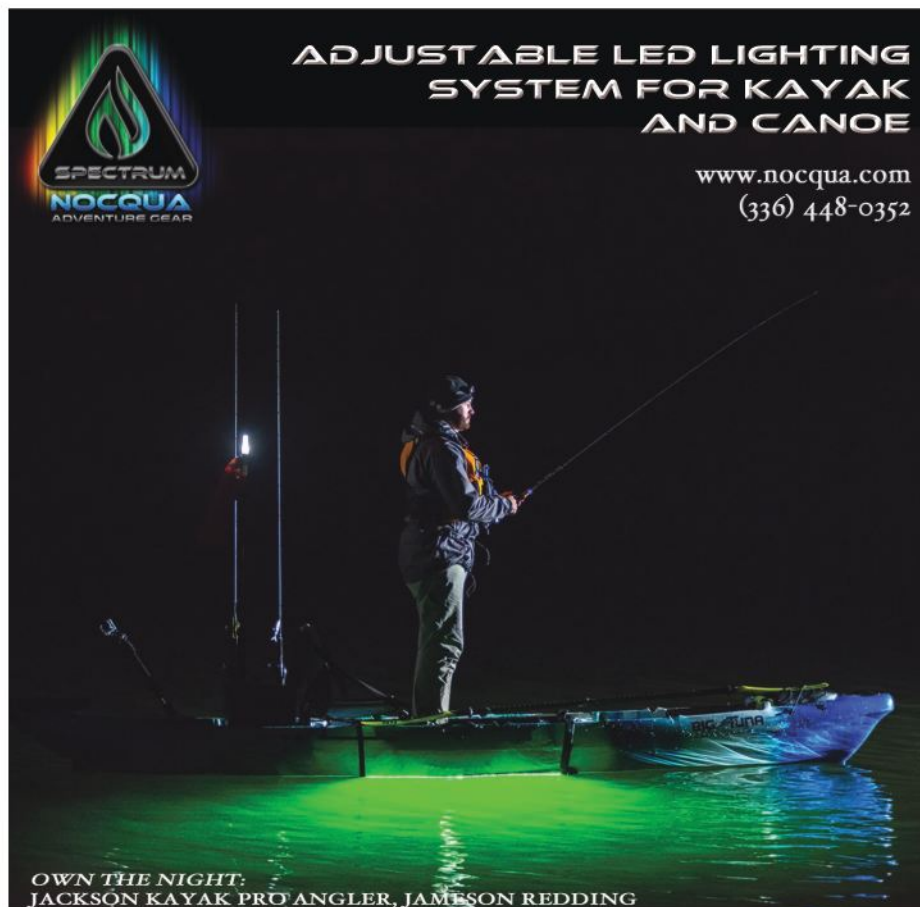
It was never about the kayak. He was simply seeking.

“Whatever it was I was looking for, I’m still looking for it,” he says. There were no answers there. There’s no answer.”

We still want a glimpse of what he saw on the other side. Like the students in his classroom or on hundreds of his guided trips, regular paddlers seek him out to find something out about themselves—perhaps they might learn something by quietly going and doing, they might go farther than they thought.

There is one last open end. Gillet plans to teach for a few more years, then sell the house, cash out, buy a boat, and sail away with Katie. Always moving ahead to the next horizon.

After all, he’s never ventured beyond Hawaii. ■



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Xception Superlight

MSRP: \$465

Category: Touring

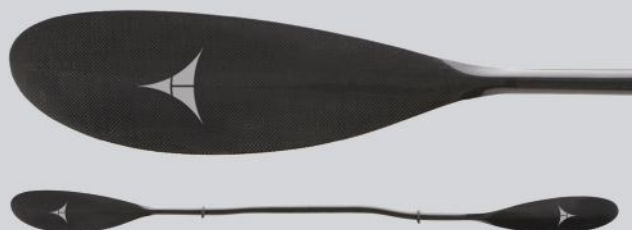
Weight: 27 oz | **Length:** 210, 220, 230, 240 cm

Shaft Material: Carbon Braid, Unibody construction, Ergo Shaft

Blade Material: Carbon Weave, Foam Core | **Blade Area:** 602 cm sq

Ferrule: Unlimited feathering, 5 cm adjustable length

The Xception Superlight offers superior performance in the lightest possible package. Featuring full carbon braided construction, its versatile blade design is balanced, efficient and forgiving, a good choice for the well-rounded paddler who enjoys a variety of conditions and utilizes many stroke types.



Fishstix

MSRP: \$355

Category: Fishing

Weight: 28 oz | **Length:** 210, 220, 230, 240 cm

Shaft Material: Carbon, Aramid and Fiberglass Braid, Unibody construction,

Ergo Shaft | **Blade Material:** Fiberglass, Foam Core

Blade Area: 633 cm sq | **Ferrule:** Unlimited feathering, 5 cm adjustable length

Used by the world's top kayak anglers, our Exodus Fishstix paddle features camouflage styling and a slightly larger blade for more stability and quicker acceleration. The shaft features the benefits of an ergonomic design and is now lighter than ever before. This paddle is a true contender!



Odyssey Carbon

MSRP: \$400 Ergo, \$320 Straight

Category: Touring

Weight: 28 oz | **Length:** 210, 220, 230, 241 cm

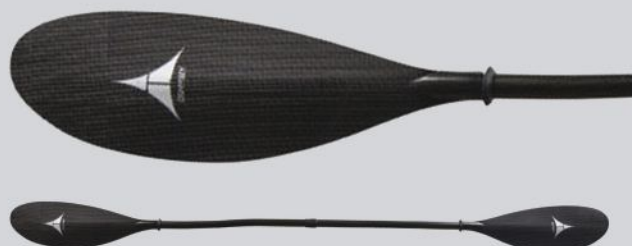
Shaft Material: Carbon Fiber, Ergo or Straight Shaft

Blade Material: Carbon Fiber | **Blade Area:** 640 cm sq

Ferrule: Unlimited feathering, 5 cm adjustable length

The Odyssey Carbon is lighter, stronger and versatile. The paddle is characterized by a lightweight carbon construction and slightly larger blade, adding durability and power without flutter. It's light weight for easier rolling and a better grip on the water.

Available in ergonomic shaft with Full Control Grip or straight shaft.



Oracle Glass

MSRP: \$300 Ergo, \$235 Straight

Category: Touring

Weight: 29 oz | **Length:** 205, 210, 215, 220, 225, 230, 235 & 240 cm in Straight

Shaft Material: Carbon Blend, Ergo or Straight Shaft | **Blade Material:** Fiberglass

Blade Area: 610 cm sq | **Ferrule:** Unlimited feathering, 5 cm adjustable length

With a blade design adapted from our AT2 whitewater paddle, the Oracle paddle was specially crafted for aggressive paddling with high angle strokes. Slight dihedral gives a more powerful stroke, less flutter, and better stability when bracing or rolling.

Available in ergonomic shaft with Full Control Grip or straight shaft.



Pursuit

MSRP: \$190 Ergo, \$125 Straight

Category: Touring

Weight: 36 oz | **Length:** 210, 220, 230, 240 cm

Shaft Material: Carbon Blend, Ergo or Straight Shaft

Blade Material: Fiberglass Reinforced Nylon | **Blade Area:** 605 cm sq

Ferrule: Unlimited feathering, 5 cm adjustable length

Ideal for relaxed paddling with low-angle strokes, the Pursuit features your choice of carbon blend ergonomic or straight shaft. In addition, our signature soft dihedral on the fiberglass reinforced nylon blade offers plenty of performance and versatility.



Search

MSRP: \$190 Ergo, \$125 Straight

Category: Touring | **Weight:** 36.5 oz

Length: 205, 210, 215, 220, 225, 230, 235 & 240 cm in Straight

Shaft Material: Carbon Blend, Ergo or Straight Shaft |

Blade Material: Fiberglass Reinforced Nylon | **Blade Area:** 602 cm sq |

Ferrule: Unlimited feathering, 5 cm adjustable length

The Search Glass is a high angle style blade featuring fiberglass reinforced nylon blades and your choice of a carbon blend ergonomic or straight shaft.

The blade is designed with less dihedral for added efficiency, an ideal feature for all-around touring or well-conditioned paddlers.



AT2 Standard

MSRP: \$440

Category: WW-Downriver

Weight: 38 oz | **Length:** 191, 194, 197, 200 cm; Custom Available

Shaft Material: Carbon, Aramid & Fiberglass Braid, Unibody Construction, Full Control Grip, Standard Diameter, Ergo Shaft | **Blade Material:** Carbon Braid with Dynell Protected Trim, Urethane Foam Core | **Blade Area:** 710 cm sq

The AT2 Standard is often compared to the AT2 Superlight—lightweight, versatile, and durable—but its unique three fiber construction makes it a stiffer alternative.

Meant for kayakers who do an equal mix of playboating and river running, it is very responsive with a powerful catch.



Titan

MSRP: \$125

Category: WW-Downriver

Weight: 37.5 oz | **Length:** 185, 188, 191, 194, 197, 200, 205, 210 cm

Shaft Material: Fiberglass, Straight Shaft, Standard Diameter

Blade Material: Fiberglass Reinforced Nylon | **Blade Area:** 660 cm sq

The Titan has been specifically designed with the new paddler in mind. The fiberglass shaft and moderately sized blades deliver durability while keeping added weight to a minimum. Its bright, vibrant blade color makes for added visibility and style on the water.



Samurai Glass

MSRP: Ergo: \$300, Straight: \$230 | **Category:** WW-Playboating

Weight: Ergo: 39 oz, Straight: 32 oz | **Length:** Ergo: 185, 188, 191, 194, 197, 200 cm, Straight: 185, 188, 191, 194, 197, 200, 205, 210 cm

Shaft Material: Carbon Blend Duraweave with Innegra™, Ergo or Straight Shaft, Standard or Small Grip | **Blade Material:** Fiberglass Duraweave™ with Innegra™ | **Blade Area:** 675 cm sq

The Samurai is ideal for paddlers who spend most of their time playboating, or for those who prefer a slightly smaller blade for all-around river running. Fiberglass blades with reinforced tips for superior abrasion resistance offer a lighter, stiffer and more durable alternative to injection molded nylon.



Hercules Glass

MSRP: Ergo: \$300, Straight: \$230

Category: WW-Downriver | **Weight:** Ergo: 39 oz, Straight: 32 oz **Length:** Ergo: 185, 188, 191, 194, 197, 200 cm, Straight: 185, 188, 191, 194, 197, 200, 205, 210 cm

Shaft Material: Carbon Blend Duraweave with Innegra™, Ergo or Straight Shaft, Standard or Small Grip | **Blade Material:** Fiberglass Duraweave™ with Innegra™ | **Blade Area:** 700 cm sq

The Hercules is our most versatile new blade—ideal for those who do it all—it's precisely balanced for all-around performance. These moderately sized fiberglass blades are a lighter, stiffer, more durable alternative to injection molded nylon and have added reinforcement on the tips for superior abrasion resistance.



AQUA-BOUND

AQUA-BOUND | OSCEOLA, WI | 715-755-3405 | AQUABOUND.COM

Spark

MSRP: \$110

Category: Touring | Shaft: Adjustable

Weight: 33 oz | Length: 70-86 in

Shaft Material: Aluminum

Blade Material: Fiberglass reinforced with Nylon | Blade Area: 100 sq in

Perfect for beginning paddleboarders, the Spark has an aluminum shaft, comfortable palm grip and fiberglass-reinforced proprietary resin blade.

It weighs only 31.5 ounces, so your time on the water is easy on muscles and joints. Also, its stiff, durable blade propels you further with every stroke.



Freedom

MSRP: \$140

Category: Touring | Shaft: Adjustable

Weight: 29 oz | Length: 70-86 in

Shaft Material: Carbon

Blade Material: Fiberglass reinforced with Nylon | Blade Area: 100 sq in

With a 100% Carbon shaft, contoured palm grip and fiberglass-reinforced proprietary resin blade, the Freedom weighs only 28 ounces, so your time on the water will be less fatiguing. Perfect for intermediate paddleboarders, its stiff, durable blade delivers more power with every stroke. No whippy, wimpy blade here.



Challenge

MSRP: \$170, fixed, \$190, adjustable

Category: Touring | Shaft: Fixed or adjustable

Weight: 25 oz fixed, 28 oz adjustable | Length: 70-86 in

Shaft Material: Carbon

Blade Material: Carbon reinforced with Nylon | Blade Area: 100 sq in

This paddle is for serious paddleboarders who appreciate its 100% Carbon shaft, contoured palm grip and Carbon-reinforced proprietary resin blade. The Challenge comes in both adjustable and fixed lengths, and each is super lightweight. The Challenge's stiff, durable blade grabs more water and delivers more power with every stroke.



Sting Ray Carbon

MSRP: \$190

Category: Straight Shaft | Shaft: Touring

Weight: 28.75 oz | Length: 210, 220, 230, 240, or 250 cm

Shaft Material: 100% Carbon

Blade Material: Carbon reinforced with Nylon | Blade Area: 561 cm sq

Feather: Adjustable in 15 degree increments any direction, Posi-Lok Ferrule

The Sting Ray Carbon is one of our best selling paddles. With no lighter paddle at this price point, this all-purpose touring paddle is an amazing value. The carbon blades and 100% carbon shaft is a lightweight, durable combination for all-day comfort.

Aqua-Bound paddles are made in the USA.



Surge Glass

MSRP: \$275

Category: Straight Shaft | Shaft: Touring

Weight: 29 oz | Length: 210, 220, 230, or 240 cm

Shaft Material: T-700 carbon shaft

Blade Material: Multi-Laminate Fiberglass | Blade Area: 670 cm sq

Feather: 0, 60 (3-Hole Snap-Button) or infinitely adjustable (Telescoping)

The Surge performance paddle offers a large blade for high-angle, high-energy paddlers. Go the distance with the performance of this powerful blade. Our exclusive aerospace T-700 carbon shaft has a multi-layered design, providing amazing durability for the weight.



BENDING BRANCHES

BENDING BRANCHES | OSCEOLA, WI | 715-755-3405 | BENDINGBRANCHES.COM

Beavertail

MSRP: \$85

Category: Touring | **Shaft:** Straight Shaft

Weight: 20 oz | **Length:** 54, 57, 60, or 63 in

Shaft Material: Solid Black Willow

Blade Material: Black Willow, Alder

Bending Branches' Beavertail wood canoe paddle is efficient for deep water lake paddling with a classic long, narrow blade. The traditional symmetrical palm grip is strong and durable as well as beautiful. Blade has five laminates of black willow and red alder.



BB Special

MSRP: \$90

Category: Touring | **Shaft:** Bent Shaft

Weight: 22 oz | **Length:** 48, 50, 52, 54, or 56 in

Shaft Material: 12-Laminate Basswood

Blade Material: Basswood, Alder, Maple

Perfect for sophisticated paddlers, the BB Special bent shaft wood canoe paddle offers flat water cruising performance for a reasonable price. The blade consists of seven laminates of basswood, maple, and red alder.



Expedition Plus

MSRP: \$140

Category: Whitewater | **Shaft:** Straight Shaft

Weight: 24 oz | **Length:** 52, 54, 56, 58, or 60 in

Shaft Material: 21-Laminate Basswood

Blade Material: Basswood, Butternut

The Expedition canoe paddle stands up under the extreme conditions of long wilderness trips and whitewater. Paddlers who require endurance and control will love the T-Grip and Rockgard protection from tip to 6" up the shaft. A fiberglass blade wrap further protects the butternut and basswood blade for maximum durability.



Limited Edition "A" Series

MSRP: \$240

Category: Touring | **Shaft:** Bent Shaft

Weight: 21 oz | **Length:** 48, 50, 52, or 54 in

Shaft Material: Ovalized 21-laminate double-bend

Blade Material: Basswood and roasted Basswood, reinforced with Rockgard

Blade Area: 677 cm sq

This is no run-of-the-woodshop paddle. It's the most hands-on, handcrafted paddle we've ever made. The double-bend design and ovalized shaft make every stroke more comfortable and more efficient. With the ergonomically angled grip that aligns with your wrist and forearm, you're guaranteed to have a more comfortable feel.



Navigator Plus

MSRP: \$280

Category: Touring | **Shaft:** Straight Shaft

Weight: 28 oz | **Length:** 210, 220, 230, or 240 cm (3-Hole Snap-Button), 215-230 cm or 225-240 cm (Telescoping) | **Shaft Material:** Satin T-700 Carbon

Blade Material: Black Willow reinforced with Rockgard

Blade Area: 619 cm sq | **Feather:** Infinitely adjustable

The Navigator provides a unique flex and the unmatched fit and finish you expect from a Bending Branches paddle. If you are looking for beauty combined with unsurpassed fit, finish and durability, look no further. Now available with the telescoping, adjustable length ferrule.



Whisper

MSRP: \$60

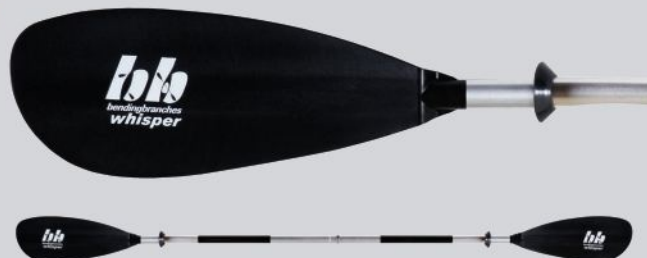
Category: Touring | **Shaft:** Straight Shaft
Weight: 37 oz | **Length:** 210, 220, 230, or 240 cm

Shaft Material: Aluminum

Blade Material: Polypropylene reinforced with Nylon | **Blade Area:** 561 cm sq

Feather: 0, 60 (3-Hole Snap-Button)

Imagine a quality, American-made kayak paddle that doesn't send your spouse running for the hills. Look no further than the Whisper. The same strength and durability of our higher-end paddles, with many of the same features, in a price range anyone can afford.



Bounce

MSRP: \$80

Category: Touring | **Shaft:** Straight Shaft
Weight: 37 oz | **Length:** 210, 220, 230, or 240 cm

Shaft Material: E-coat Aluminum

Blade Material: Polypropylene reinforced with Nylon | **Blade Area:** 561 cm sq

Feather: 0, 60 (3-Hole Snap-Button)

All of the durability you expect from Bending Branches, now with the most comfortable grips of any kayak paddle, at any price. The bright yellow X-grips allow no-slip control and defuse any blistering. With a tight ferrule system, there is no wiggle or wobble providing a smooth, easy paddling stroke.



Sunrise Glass

MSRP: \$100

Category: Touring | **Shaft:** Straight Shaft
Weight: 35 oz | **Length:** 210, 220, 230, or 240 cm

Shaft Material: Fiberglass

Blade Material: Polypropylene reinforced with Nylon | **Blade Area:** 561 cm sq

Feather: 0, 60 (3-Hole Snap-Button)

Best recreational paddle on the market. Lightweight, durable fiberglass shaft that'll keep your joints from feeling achy, even after a full day of paddling. High-vis yellow polypropylene blades. Great for all types of paddling and all ages.



Angler Classic

MSRP: \$140

Category: Fishing | **Shaft:** Straight Shaft
Weight: 35 oz | **Length:** 220, 230, 240, 250, or 260 cm

Shaft Material: Fiberglass

Blade Material: Fiberglass reinforced with Nylon | **Blade Area:** 670 cm sq

Feather: 0, 60 (RHC or LHC)

The #1 best selling kayak fishing paddle in the world. And for good reason. Incredibly strong construction with the features anglers demand like a 40 inch tape measure and hook-retrieval system. Offered in two color and lengths up to 260cm, this paddle is a no-brainer. Made in Osceola, Wisconsin.



Angler Ace

MSRP: \$200

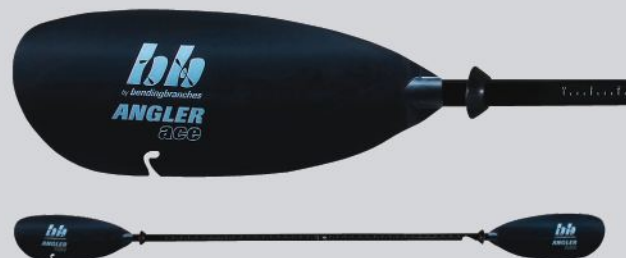
Category: Fishing | **Shaft:** Straight Shaft
Weight: 31 | **Length:** 220, 230, 240, 250, or 260 cm

Shaft Material: T-700 Carbon shaft

Blade Material: Carbon reinforced with Nylon | **Blade Area:** 670 cm sq

Feather: 0, 60 (RHC or LHC)

If carbon fiber paddle technology had a baby with fishing technology, this would be the result. All of the lightest and most technical advances from 30 years of building kayak paddles, combined with a beat-me-up fisherman's structure, and the outcome is the Angler Ace. You're welcome kayak fishing world.



SWIFT PADDLES

SWIFT PADDLES | BURLINGTON, WA | 360-757-2300 | EDDYLINE.COM/SWIFT-PADDLES

Mid Swift

MSRP: \$279-\$329

Category: Touring | **Shaft:** Breakdown, Adjustable

Weight: 27-31 oz | **Length:** 205-240 cm

Shaft Material: Carbon | **Blade Material:** Composite Carbon

Blade Area: 645 cm sq

The Mid Swift is our most popular blade size and an excellent choice for most touring kayakers. It delivers plenty of pull and control in rough water and windy conditions. The ideal paddle for extended paddling in varied and changeable conditions and the only paddle many kayakers will ever need.



Sea Swift

MSRP: \$279-\$329

Category: Touring | **Shaft:** Breakdown, Adjustable

Weight: 27-31 oz | **Length:** 205-240 cm

Shaft Material: Carbon | **Blade Material:** Composite Carbon

Blade Area: 709 cm sq

The Sea Swift is a full sized aggressive blade design that retains the versatility of conventional blades for bracing, sculling and rolling while offering sufficient power to be useful in the racing world. It is ideal as a big water paddle in surf and rough conditions for the more athletic paddler.



Wind Swift

MSRP: \$279-\$329

Category: Touring | **Shaft:** Breakdown, Adjustable

Weight: 27-31 oz | **Length:** 205-240 cm

Shaft Material: Carbon | **Blade Material:** Composite Carbon

Blade Area: 484 cm sq

The Wind Swift combines Aleut features with some more modern European concepts to create a paddle that is excellent in high winds and still delivers a healthy amount of paddle power for all but the most demanding conditions. Another major advantage to this style of paddle is kindness to joints and muscles.



Skookum High Angle

MSRP: \$279-\$329

Category: Touring | **Shaft:** Breakdown, Adjustable

Weight: 27-31 oz | **Length:** 205-240 cm

Shaft Material: Carbon | **Blade Material:** Composite Carbon

Blade Area: 709 cm sq

The Skookum is specifically customized to suit the paddler who prefers a high-angle performance paddle. It retains all the power and thrust and smooth follow through of the original Sea Swift only with a high angle of attack. The Skookum combines the most important elements of a high angle paddle—control, power, and efficiency.



Fabric Inlaid (all models)

MSRP: \$299

Category: Touring | **Shaft:** Breakdown, Adjustable

Weight: 27-31 oz | **Length:** 205-240 cm

Shaft Material: Carbon | **Blade Material:** Composite Carbon

Blade Area: 484 cm sq

Swift paddles possess a radiant translucence in sunlight that is highly visible and exceptionally beautiful. We offer many stunning custom fabric inlays that are translucent and quite striking when the sun shines through them. There are a variety of styles and colors to choose from. Each style is a limited edition.



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EPIC PADDLES

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SMALL MID WING

MSRP: \$369 Club Carbon, \$449 Full Carbon

Weight: 23 oz | **Length:** Adjustable

Feather: Adjustable

The Epic Small Mid Wing paddle is based on our award-winning Mid Wing, with a 2% reduced blade surface area. This slightly trimmed-down design makes it ideal for smaller paddlers, cruisers and racers paddling long distances, as well as those who simply seek a smaller option to maximize their efficiency.

Available in Club Carbon and Full Carbon construction.



MID WING

MSRP: \$369 Club Carbon, \$449 Full Carbon

Weight: 24 oz | **Length:** Adjustable

Feather: Adjustable

The award-winning Epic Mid Wing has become the top choice for fitness and racing paddlers, and increasingly, touring kayakers who want to maximize their forward stroke. Stable, smooth and powerful, the Mid Wing will have you paddling farther and faster. Available in Club Carbon and Full Carbon construction.



RELAXED TOURING

MSRP: \$279 Hybrid, \$449 Full Carbon

Weight: 22 oz | **Length:** Adjustable

Shaft: Straight Carbon, Straight Glass

Feather: Adjustable

The Epic Relaxed Touring paddle is lightweight, stable and exceedingly smooth. Perfect for the cruising kayaker and a slightly less aggressive, low angle paddle stroke.

The Relaxed Touring blade features a longer and narrower surface area, facilitating a stroke easy on the shoulders with the power and control needed for any water conditions. Available in Hybrid, and Full Carbon construction.



ACTIVE TOURING

MSRP: \$279 Hybrid, \$449 Full Carbon

Weight: 24 oz | **Length:** Adjustable

Shaft: Straight Carbon, Straight Glass

Feather: Adjustable

The Epic Active Touring paddle combines the lightweight, clean performance of

Epic's Relaxed Touring paddle with a larger blade surface, providing more power for paddlers utilizing a high angle stroke and seeking a distinct edge in speed and acceleration. Perfect for fast touring and racers who opt not to use a wing paddle. Available in Hybrid, and Full Carbon construction.



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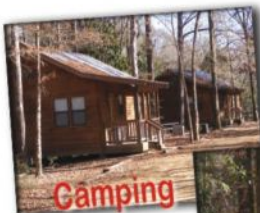
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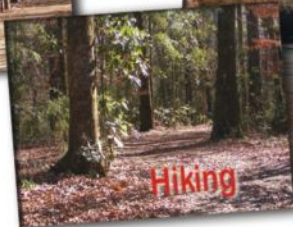
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Crystal X

MSRP: \$299 Carbon, Bent Shaft
\$189 Fiberglass, Straight Shaft

Category: Touring | **Weight:** 32 oz | **Length:** 210, 220, 230, 240 cm
Shaft Material: Carbon or Fiberglass | **Blade Material:** Transparent Nylon
Blade Area: 638-716 cm sq | **Feather:** Fast Ferrule

The eye catching transparent blades paddle as good as they look. A multi-component design creates a blade that is extremely smooth and flutter free. This paddle is sure to be center of attention wherever it goes. Available in both high and low angle.



ECO-REC LWT

MSRP: \$249

Category: Touring | **Shaft:** Bent Shaft
Weight: 30 oz | **Length:** 210, 220, 230, 240 cm
Shaft Material: Carbon | **Blade Material:** ECO-Friendly Glass Filled Polymer
Blade Area: 638 cm sq | **Feather:** Adjustable, Fast Ferrule
Our most popular paddle, featuring a high performance lightweight glass fiber polymer blade. An extremely smooth and powerful blade available in both a low and high angle to meet all paddling needs. Available with our Fast Ferrule system to make feather adjustments on the fly a breeze.

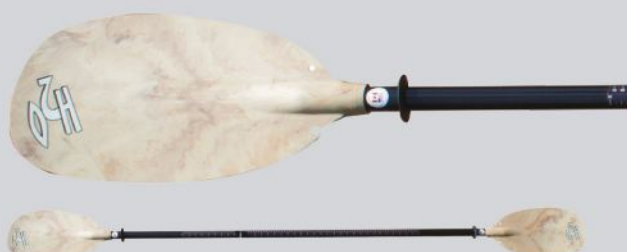


FISH

MSRP: \$159

Category: Fishing | **Shaft:** Straight Shaft
Weight: 34 oz | **Length:** 220, 230, 240, 250 cm
Shaft Material: Fiberglass | **Blade Material:** Glass filled polymer
Blade Area: 638 cm sq | **Feather:** 0 & 60

A kayak fishing specific tool, the H2O-Fish features a lightweight fiberglass shaft with tape measure and a unique Camo finish. Available in lengths up to 250 cm. The best tool in the box.



H2O-SUP Team

MSRP: \$199

Category: Touring | **Shaft:** Straight Shaft
Weight: 31 oz | **Length:** Adjustable, 70"-86" | **Shaft Material:** Fiberglass
Blade Material: Fiberglass /Polyro | **Blade Area:** 632 cm sq
Lead, don't follow. The H2O SUP Team blade is a new and unique take on the traditional SUP paddle blade. The innovative double concave outer profile provides greater stability and great power in a compact blade size. Comes with a height adjustable shaft that fits paddlers 5'2" to 6'6".



SuperTour TPX

MSRP: \$399

Category: Touring | **Shaft:** Bent Shaft
Weight: 27 oz | **Length:** 210, 220, 230, 240 cm | **Shaft Material:** Carbon
Blade Material: Carbon Polymer, TPX | **Blade Area:** 638 cm sq
Feather: Fast Ferrule

New for 2014 is H2O's newest high performance paddle. Once again H2O breaks new ground in paddle material science. Our SuperTour TPX paddle features blades made of a light and durable exotic carbon polymer. Our SuperTour weighs in at a scant 27 oz, the perfect blend of art and science.



SEATTLE SPORTS

SEATTLE SPORTS CO. | SEATTLE, WA | 800-632-6163 | SEATTLESPOORTSCO.COM

SeaWhisper Carbon Hybrid

MSRP: \$110-\$120

Category: Kayak Touring | Shaft: Adjustable

Weight: 38 and 41 oz | Length: 210/220 cm and 230/240 cm

Shaft Material: Carbon | Blade Material: Glass Reinforced Nylon

Blade Area: 650 cm sq | Feather: Adjustable

The SeaWhisper was designed with recreational use, fishing, and touring in mind. With durable glass reinforced nylon blades and a 100% carbon shaft, you won't find a lighter paddle at this price point. Features include molded catch points, reflective emblems for safety, and oversized drip rings for maximum drip protection.



Zephyr Carbon Hybrid

MSRP: \$100

Category: SUP Touring | Shaft: Adjustable

Weight: 22 oz | Length: 170-210 cm | Shaft Material: Carbon

Blade Material: Glass Reinforced Nylon | Blade Area: 90 sq in

The Zephyr features a mid-sized glass reinforced nylon blade to suit a wide range of paddlers. The lightweight and adjustable 100% carbon shaft makes this paddle a must for daytrips, recreational paddling and lightweight training/racing alike. Features include an ergonomic T-handle, reflective emblem for safety, and a louvered blade for an efficient stroke.



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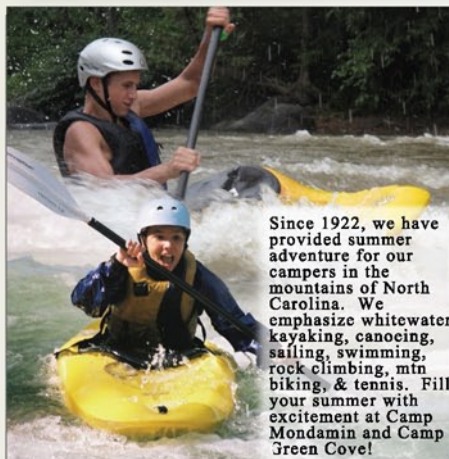
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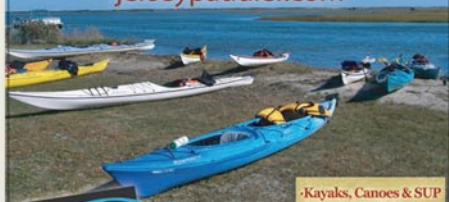


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HAP WILSON

CANOEIST, TRAILBLAZER

Published in 1978, Hap Wilson's *Temagami Canoe Routes* was the first-ever guidebook to this rugged part of Ontario. It also was a work of art. Based on Wilson's eight years in the field as a backcountry ranger for the Ministry of Natural Resources, the pamphlet was meticulously adorned with Wilson's own illustrations of every portage and campsite. "Canoeheads," as Wilson calls them, loved it, and so did environmental activists. In the late '80s, Temagami, which is home to some of the largest old-growth red and white pine forest in the world, became the site of an intense battle that pitched pro-logging factions against wilderness advocates. Wilson, who went on to found the region's first major canoe outfitting and guide service, became the local environmental movement's de facto leader. The fight was long and dirty, but Wilson and company eventually prevailed: Today, the greater Temagami area encompasses more than 1,100 square miles and contains some 2,400 miles of designated canoe routes.

For Wilson, it was the beginning of a long and feisty career as an environmental crusader, author, artist, and self-proclaimed survivalist. Over the past 30 years he's charted thousands of miles of canoe routes, won numerous awards and co-founded the Toronto-based environment group Earthroots. Along the way, he's scuffled with seal poachers, advised Hollywood, and paddled a cumulative 37,000 miles. At 62, he's still as spirited as ever. — *Sam Moulton*

I made a pact with myself as a teenager that I would make canoeing my livelihood in any way I could. And I stuck to my guns I guess.

I grew up in the outskirts of Toronto. I spent a lot of time running wild. My parents fought a lot, so I'd crawl out of my window and sleep in a teepee in a friend's backyard.

My father made survival movies for the Department of Lands and Forest, and used to have elder native woodsmen on the sets. One particular guy would take my brother and I out and teach us camp craft and canoe skills. I was fascinated by his intonations and his movements, his body language. I was just stricken by the ease with which he did things—the calmness.

I was fortunate to get a job in my early 20s as a park ranger in Temagami. It gave me a good opportunity to see how our government mismanaged the resources.

There used to be 30 rangers out there and one guy in the head office filing reports. Now you've got 50 people plugged into computers and no one is in the field anymore.

After eight years, I started my own tour company and vowed to get even with the Ministry for doing all these atrocities to my wilderness.

In the '80s, I had clients that had their tires slashed while they were out canoeing. It was a pretty crazy time. Guys with frontend loaders would be waving their buckets at canoeists, who would stand there wondering what the hell was going on.

The mainstream environmental movement in Canada has bargained away more wilderness than we've protected through more aggressive means.

My job is to open cans of worms on environmental issues and leave it with the economic development people and local bureaucrats and politicians to hash it out.

If the power goes out at my house, or up at our eco-lodge, we could survive for a couple of months. It's just my nature as a survivalist. I have friends who say if something goes down, we'll just go to Hap's house.

I had to hand-wrestle a bull moose that was rampaging around my neighbor's

yard. I literally took the bull by the horns.

For the movie 'Grey Owl,' I was enlisted to teach Pierce Brosnan how to throw knife, canoe, and what not. He got the J-stroke down, but couldn't turn the canoe in the wind.

People were dying on the Missinaibi River because a cartographer had marked the portage on the wrong side of the river. Before my guidebook to the area came out, there was an average of two deaths a year on the river. Since my book has distributed, there haven't been any. I like to take a little bit of credit for that, that forewarned is forearmed.

My wife and I used to do some racing 20 years ago and we're just getting back into it now. We did a local 130-kilometer canoe race last fall, the world's longest single-day canoe race. It was brutal, below freezing and completely fogged in. Half the racers had to sleep in the bush. I thought, 'Hey, this is right up our alley. This is what we do for a living anyway.'

The hardest thing for a white European is to sit in the wilderness and do nothing. You're forced to acknowledge the world around you and your place in it.





Made it! The view from Chilkoot Pass.

I ASKED ABOUT FINDING FRESHWATER OFF THE BERING SEA. NO ONE ANSWERED MY QUESTION. THEY JUST TOLD ME I WAS GOING TO DIE.



Making miles in the Sea Wind.

BOB VOLLHABER'S SIX-MONTH ARCTIC ODYSSEY

AS TOLD TO KATIE MCKY

After finishing a 300-mile solo trip in the Boundary Waters, I knew I wanted to do something much longer, so I began researching the Inside Passage from Seattle to Southeast Alaska.

The idea grew from there. I had built a cabin in Alaska in 1989 and always wanted to see it again, and I'd always wanted to canoe the Yukon too. The Chilkoot Pass would take me from the Inside Passage to the Yukon, and then I'd reach my cabin by paddling up the Chandalar River and portaging 15 miles of tundra. The Bering Sea would then take me back to Anchorage. The route was 5,000 miles altogether, and I planned to paddle it solo in my Kruger Sea Wind canoe.

On an Alaskan outdoor forum, I asked about finding freshwater off the Bering Sea. No one answered my question. They just told me I was going to die.

I saw over a hundred humpback whales on the Inside Passage. One night the tide flooded my tent. I awoke at three in the

morning in eight inches of water. Half my stuff was frozen.

Portaging the Chilkoot Trail with 250 pounds of gear and my canoe was the worst. It took three carries.

I almost lost the canoe on the Chandalar River when the current flipped me. I then portaged 15 hard miles of spongy tundra. When I got to my cabin, I discovered it had been torched. It was just moss on logs.

I saw killer whales and belugas on the Bering Sea, and rescued an Arctic loon from a salmon net. It sat on my leg for half an hour. The huge coastal brown bears did not fear me. I was windbound for two and a half days and those bears came closer and closer. I didn't sleep well those nights.

I only found brackish water off the Bering Sea, so I drank rainwater. Eskimos motored out to me, thinking I was shipwrecked. They thought I was crazy too.

The ebbing tide exposed mud flats. I'd

be stuck on the mud two or three miles out, sometimes until two in the morning. I put my mattress under me and tried to stay warm. It was too cold to sleep. When the canoe started rocking, I knew the water was back.

I capsized at Tongue Spit. I was paddling in 4-foot swell when a rogue wave hit me. I surfed for 30 feet before my bow plunged and flipped me. I dragged the canoe to shore fighting waves the whole way. I lost my hat, but some Eskimos gave me a nice fleece hat later, so Tongue Spit didn't lick me after all.

When I was paddling, I missed my family and friends, warmth, and fatty foods like cheeseburgers. Now that I'm home, I miss the independence and exploration. Whenever I drive over a river, I want to paddle it.

Minnesota adventurer Bob "BeaV" Vollhaber, 47, spent six months paddling and portaging to, across, and around Alaska. He finished in September.

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